

# Editorial

## Nuts and Bolts without a Chassis

**I**t would be unthinkable, would it not, for a car to be produced which had no chassis or sub-frame. While I am not at all of a mechanical frame of mind, I seem to remember that some time in the distant past one manufacturer did try and save substantial costs by producing a vehicle that was welded together without any chassis frame. Needless to say, the car was not a success. In a crash it folded up like a pack of cards. Indeed, under any kind of exceptional weight or stress its floor sagged and it became unroadworthy.

Anyone can see the absurdity of such a production—nuts and bolts in abundance, along with comfortable (even luxury) seating, doors, windows, dashboard, engine, wheels and brakes, but no strong frame or chassis on which to anchor the entire machine. The gullible buyer might be enticed by the colour, design and brochure. But no one with any sense who knew there was no chassis would ever waste his

money on such a car or risk his life driving it.

### The chassis

Some readers will already be aware of the importance of the right relationship between the text and the preacher's theological framework. However, for those for whom this is unfamiliar territory, let me explain. I start with the preacher's framework which is the 'chassis' in my metaphor.

We all have a framework of Christian belief. It has been gradually built up since our earliest days, whether at our mother's knee or in a Sunday School class. Steadily, imperceptibly, that framework has been added to and has grown and developed. It has seen development as we have listened to sermons and absorbed the meaning of the great psalms and hymns of our tradition. It has known rapid growth when we have explicitly studied theology or read some book on Christian

# Contents

- 1 Editorial
- 4 John Calvin on John's Gospel  
Sinclair Ferguson
- 11 Sermon on the Nativity with an Invitation to the Lord's Table  
John Calvin
- 17 Belonging and Believing  
Andrew Bathgate
- 22 Grief and Loss  
Bill Webster
- 27 Reluctant Joiners  
Andrew Rollinson
- 34 Ann Allen meets George Russell
- 36 Book Reviews

*the chassis needs the coach to be built on it.*

## *And the coach is the text and passage*

doctrine. Our Bible study has constantly increased it.

At times, when we have had to deal with difficult problems, its progress has been arrested and may even on occasions have regressed. No thoughtful person can study Scripture and seek to relate it to the current problems screaming at us from this crazy, fallen world without being shocked into some hard thinking. We have wrestled with ethical and moral questions about the nature of God, the nature of humankind, the glaring hypocrisy of the visible church and the shameful behaviour and attitudes of many professing Christians. We have been tempted to despair. 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!' we have cried with the Preacher of Ecclesiastes.

Nevertheless, by the grace of God we have emerged from these intellectual crises with a more solid-if reconstructed-doctrinal framework. Honourably wounded, our hurts have slowly healed as we have found consolation and refreshment in renewed search and study of our Bibles. Thus has the chassis been tested, strengthened and made more fit for the heavy load it must bear if we are faithfully to preach Christ crucified and risen.

### **Driving a chassis**

For ten years I lived near a factory where buses were built—at least where the bus chassis was built and the huge engine bolted to it. The rest of the bus was constructed at a coachworks some miles away so it was a daily occurrence to see the rudimentary bus being driven from the factory to the coachworks. The driver would be muffled up against wind and rain and would be wearing goggles and those old fashioned strap-on hats one normally associates with motoring in the 1920s. It might be fun driving a bus chassis on a lovely sunny day in June but it was a different story in February with driving rain cutting you in the face!

I don't want to spend too much time developing this aspect of my metaphor. Sufficient to say that we have all heard 'chassis' sermons. I mean we have all heard sermons which were little more than a presentation of some particular doctrine lifted straight out of the preacher's framework. The sermon was undoubtedly prompted by the text though it bore little or no relationship to it, far less to the text's immediate or wider context. I could give you scores of examples. A couple of years ago I heard a sermon on justification by faith which purported to be based on the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt.25:31-46). A less likely conjunction of doctrine and text it would be hard to imagine!

This style of preaching known as 'framework preaching' is not uncommon, even in our postmodern culture. The congregation are expected to climb aboard the chassis while the intrepid driver battles against the elements as he seeks to reach some destination or other. Of course, what is entirely wrong with the exercise is that he has never headed for the coachworks. He has no intention of driving a comfortable bus in which to carry his passengers. So while a journey of sorts is made, the vehicle used was never intended to take anyone on such a journey. In other words, the actual passage of Scripture was never really used in the sermon.

### **The coachworks**

My metaphor is about to break down. But I will try and stretch it to illustrate a further point. I have not been suggesting for one moment that the bus chassis is of no importance. Rather have I been trying to bring out that the chassis needs the coach to be built on it. And the coach is the text and passage.

We all know that coaches differ greatly in quality and provision. I recall from the past some old dinosaurs

of coaches with wooden seats, inadequate heaters and the suspension of armoured personnel carriers. But they served the purpose. By contrast, modern technology has produced streamlined luxury coaches with individual seating adjustments, air-conditioning controls, sound-proofing and a suspension which absorbs almost every undulation in the road.

The village preacher may have little finesse in his sermon construction and even less in his use of illustrations, but he nonetheless drives his congregation in his spartan vehicle safely and unerringly to the destination of his text. The gifted preacher ministering in the well filled city centre church may delight and inspire his hearers for 40 minutes or more, carrying them in comfort to the text's destination. Yet both preachers have fulfilled their task faithfully, effectively and accurately as they have laid out the meaning and relevance of their texts, one in undorned blunt language and the other with the great gifts God has given him. Neither has subjected the congregation to a journey seated on the exposed, hard frame of the chassis. Both have used the vehicle of holy writ.

### **No framework**

It's time I abandoned my metaphor altogether. To use it one final time, the burden of what I am trying to say is that increasingly evangelicals are preaching sermons which have no firm chassis holding all together. Their theological framework is lamentably lacking. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Very recently I heard a taped sermon on a passage which dealt, among other things, with the ethnic purity of the Old Testament people of God, the Sabbath and the Mosaic Covenant. The preacher made three points which sent my theological antennae into red alert. First, he gave a most inadequate explanation of the role of Israel in the cumulative self-revelation of God in redemptive history. Second, he dismissed the Day of Rest as an obsolete Old Testament legal requirement. Third, he blandly informed his con-

gregation that the first covenant had failed which was why God had been obliged to send his Son.

As I have travelled throughout this past year, the same lack of any theological chassis in sermons has depressingly impressed me. At the end of some sermons, one scratches one's head and wonders, 'What was all that about?' There have maybe been a few heart-throbbing little stories, some smart exegetical points, some oratorical flourishes-but where on earth (or in heaven) has it all been leading? What drives me near to despair is that if I cannot understand what the sermon was about after over thirty years of pastoral ministry myself, what about the suffering congregation who are subjected to this carbonated pseudo-theological froth Sunday by Sunday?

### **Constructing a framework**

It has been fashionable in the superficially influential circles in the denomination of which I am a member to malign and slander the Westminster Confession of Faith in recent decades. But I have to say that when a Westminster man preaches, at least he has the doctrines of sin, grace, faith and obedience firmly in place as a chassis for his sermon. True, some of that theological genre have been justly accused of legalism. But I think that has been more a fault of their tradition than of the Confession.

For myself, as I look back, I have to say that there have been certain very clear powerful influences on me in building my framework. I believe that my time at theological college largely equipped with me tools for the task, and since then, using those tools, the chassis has been constructed. How has that happened? It would be a fascinating personal exercise to try and analyse the countless influences that have worked on me and in me. But without entering into such (for the reader) unprofitable introspection, I can at once identify four all important factors.

The first is very practical. Under the influence of my old teacher, Ernest

*when a Westminster man preaches, at least he has the doctrines of sin, grace, faith and obedience firmly in place as a chassis for his sermon*

F Kevan, from the very start of my ministry I set aside each morning as sacred time to be alone in my study with an open Bible before me. I allowed only minimal flexibility in this. Undertakers were invariably co-operative, accepting that funerals for me generally needed to be after 1pm-I had an engagement every morning which was a first priority. So four and a half to five hours each day alone in my study has been indispensable to me in forging the chassis for preaching.

Second, there has been the open Bible. I have always begun each day with about 45 minutes of Scripture reading: an Old Testament book, a Psalm, a Gospel and an Letter. In addition, I have engaged in ongoing study of one particular book as my personal tryst with my God, reading and examining it in detail, not to preach it but to learn in it of the Lord.

Third, there have been the commentaries and books which are the tools of the trade. First among these has been Calvin. I have found that many more recent commentaries are watery gruel compared to the strong lean meat of the older writers. Of course there are exceptions in both directions. But who can compare Calvin on Genesis or John Owen on Hebrews or William Gurnall on Ephesians 6 with the wish-washy booklets publishers produce for quick-fix preachers today?

Fourth, there have been the printed sermons of the great preachers, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, C H Spurgeon, J H Jowett and others.

Well do I recall Dr Kevan's wise counsel about learning the art of preaching. 'You need a three point plan,' he would tell his students. 'Write this down.' With pens poised we waited for him as he wrote in chalk on the lecture room blackboard: 1. Work

2. Work 3. Work. I firmly believe he was right. Absolutely right.

### **Dynamic Interaction**

No, I am not commending 'framework preaching'. That must be clear enough from what I have already written. However, what I am deploring is the attempt to preach the Word of God without any framework. In this regard, one has to sound a warning note over the current fashion in conservative evangelical scholarship to promote biblical theology (sometimes called 'redemptive history' because it seeks to trace the ongoing unfolding story of salvation which begins with Genesis and inexorably moves forward through to Revelation) over systematic theology. Biblical theology seeks to treat the revelation of God in Scripture chronologically and always is searching for ways in which a text (even in Old Testament historical narrative) points to Christ. Systematic theology treats the revelation of God in Scripture thematically and so builds a theological framework or system. Preachers need both. We must not neglect either.

However, in preaching there must be preserved a fine balance between the text or passage on the one hand and our framework on the other hand. The mighty themes of Scripture must come shining through. Or to change the figure entirely, the foliage and branches of the tree must grow out of a sturdy trunk with deep strong roots. Those themes-the strong tree trunk-are the doctrines of God's grace. (But bear in mind that the divine grace never excludes that righteous judgement of God nor his holy severity against sin. Indeed, a framework without a doctrine of hell isn't worth a damn.)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

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Have you ever seen a demonstration of hawking? Birds of prey can be trained to fly high into the heavens, until they are no longer visible to the naked eye; yet they hear and respond to their master's call and come swooping back down to rest on his wrist. The text must have freedom to rise like an eagle in flight into the blue skies of divine truth, but ever remain within call of the under-girding doctrines of grace.

May it be that from the pulpits of our land the gospel sounds out clearly and strongly. May our people learn what God is like—not what folk religion believes him to be—that our churches may be built upon truth, righteousness and grace, all of which flow from the heart of the loving and holy God.

# John Calvin on

## A Commentator for Preachers

DR SINCLAIR B FERGUSON, ST GEORGE'S TRON,  
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Calvin's Old and New Testament Commentaries differ from each other in style.<sup>1</sup>

More than half of the former have their immediate origin in his classroom lectures to his students, while the latter were all specifically written as commentaries, although no doubt his New Testament lectures and his comments at The Congregation (the weekly pastors' meetings in Geneva) lie in the background. More accurately, many of the New Testament commentaries were probably dictated by Calvin from his bed — on which he spent long hours, physically weakened, but mentally vigorous!

The publication of an entire series of commentaries was clearly already on the still young Reformer's mind while he was working on the second edition of his *Institutes* in 1539. He wrote to his readers, explaining his programme:

'If, after this road has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In

this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom [...] .'<sup>2</sup>

Calvin was probably already well through the preparation of his first commentary — on Romans — as he wrote; the impact of his concentrated study of the epistle is evident in various ways in the 1539 and later editions of the *Institutes*.

The Romans commentary was published in 1540. From hints he gives in later commentaries it is clear that the plan was to complete the exposition of the Pauline corpus, and thereafter the whole of the New Testament. And the Reformation public were hungry for the vision to come to fruition. But he was often hindered in this task. The second volume, on 1 Corinthians, did not appear until 1546. But during the last ten years of his life he completed the entire series, with the exception only of Revelation (which it is often said he claimed not to understand) and 2 and 3 John. Given his other activities and his tenuous health, it is a mark of his singular genius and determination that he was able to accomplish so much.

### By a preacher for preachers

But Calvin *for preachers*? Can one expect much help from a master theologian (and to those who have not read him a rather intimidating one) when one is a preacher?

Perhaps it is as well to note what we do not get. There is little in the way of technical introduction and apparatus on display. Calvin cleared his work bench of the shavings before he presented his finished work. 'Lucid brevity' is his goal.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the philosophy of recent commentary-writing, Calvin self-consciously aimed for clutter-free volumes.

Again, there is little of major structural analysis — usually only a brief outline of the theme. For these, insofar as they prove valuable to interpreting Scripture, we need to look elsewhere.

But we do get some great and important things. For one thing, these are commentaries written *by a preacher for preachers*. Indeed the distinction between his commentaries and his sermons is largely a matter of form and context. For that reason alone, there is a great deal in Calvin's commentaries that translates easily into preaching.

# John's Gospel

Furthermore, since Calvin's great burden as an interpreter of Scripture is always to seek out the *scopus* of the text, his work is invaluable in helping us get to the point (still a *sine qua non* of good preaching!). From this foundation, Calvin then provides us with solid theological and doctrinal instruction which grounds his rich application.

But, for most preachers, what gives real value to a commentary is a sometimes less easily defined quality: its ability to stimulate, to prime the pump for our own work on a passage, sometimes giving us a jump start when the batteries have begun to run dry. Calvin does exactly this, occasionally in surprising ways. All this and more we discover in the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

The *Commentary on John* was published in 1553 and translated into French in the same year. In English it amounts to some 500 pages.<sup>4</sup> We cannot examine it exhaustively here, but in introducing it as an aid to preachers, three foci will give us a taste of its usefulness.

## 1. General Characteristics

For Calvin the gospel is 'the glad and joyful message of the grace revealed to us in Christ, to teach us to despise the world and its transient riches and pleasures.'<sup>5</sup> This is a note which he strikes again and again.

The distinctiveness of John's Gospel is seen to be two-fold:

First, John 'fills in' what the other Gospel writers omit — a relatively simple view of their inter-relationship. Second, the Synoptic Gospels narrate more fully the *history* of Jesus' life and ministry. John, by contrast, has a focus on Christ's *office* (prophet, priest and king). Calvin puts it memorably, 'the first three exhibit His body, if I may be permitted to put it like that, but John shows His soul'.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, for Calvin, as we read Scripture as a unified testimony to Christ, the Gospel of John provides the theological key by which we are to read the Synoptics. This becomes a basic hermeneutical principle.

Calvin had been educated in the context of French Humanism. Its impact on him was already evident in his 1532 *Commentary on Seneca's De*

*Clementia*. Now he added to his grammatical-historical exegetical instincts a strong theological and Christological sensitivity. Combining these, he typically will do several things as he works his way through the text.

1. He provides a simple statement of the *scopus* of the pericope, and where necessary adds some grammatical comments.

2. He expounds the theological significance of the passage, and, in particular within the context of John's Gospel, its Christological importance.

3. He shows its relation to and consistency with other parts of Scripture, providing harmonisation where necessary.

4. On occasion he will suggest various possible interpretations, and indicate his disagreement with other commentators. Interestingly in his *Commentary on St. John*, Augustine is a discussion partner with whom he regularly disagrees — an indication of his ability to appreciate the great Father's theological exposition of grace (in the *Institutes* Augustine is 'wholly ours'), while he is not always so comfortable with his exegesis!

5. He moves gracefully from exegesis

to theology, but equally readily to practical application. Here the metaphor of the mirror, which is used in various ways in the Calvin corpus, is called into strategic service. Christ's dealings with one individual thereby become a paradigm for and an insight into his dealings with contemporary individuals and the entire church.

## 2. Theological Strengths

One of the gains of contemporary Gospel scholarship is that the theological character of the Gospels is widely recognised. They are not merely an amalgamation of biographical facts (although they are not thereby fictional). For Calvin that perspective is so obvious as scarcely to require special stress. It would take us far beyond the boundaries of one brief study to explore the theological contribution of his *Commentary on St John* as an aid to preachers. But a few hints may be sufficient to underline its value.

### *Calvin becomes a companion to keep our eyes fixed on Christ*

#### John's Christology

John's Christology is magnificently expounded, and in particular there is a sensitivity to the full, real and true humanity of Christ that outstrips almost everything in the Christian literature that preceded it. Calvin throbs with the robust, insightful and sensitive expression he gives to what it meant for the Word to be made flesh. For example: 'the Son of God stooped so low as to take to Himself that flesh addicted to so many wretchednesses. "Flesh" here is not used for corrupt nature (as in Paul), but for mortal man. It denotes derogatorily his frail and almost transient nature'<sup>7</sup>. It is refreshing to sense that he actually believes in what he says and delights to express it so that he may himself contemplate it.

In this same area, it is salutary to ob-

serve so robust an exponent and defender of the deity of Christ seeking to listen in total silence to what the text is actually saying about him. Rather than stretching passages which speak of the oneness of Father and Son to turn them into proofs of Christ's absolute deity as such, Calvin sees several of the passages employed in the earlier patristic debates as expressions of the harmony between the Father and the incarnate mediator rather than straightforward proof-texts for his deity. While he admires and defends the theology of the Fathers, his desire to be absolutely dictated to by the text of Scripture comes to the surface very evidently. His approach helps to illustrate the difference between rightly believing that something is a truth of Scripture and wrongly insisting that it is the truth of a particular passage which in fact states something different.

But, most of all, Calvin helps the preacher to see that preaching from a Gospel must be preaching full of

is, after all, much that we do not know that might explain why there are different perspectives in the Gospels. But when he does seek to harmonise he does so with simplicity and modesty.<sup>8</sup>

#### Christ and the law

As readers of the *Institutes* would expect, he excels in the balance with which he expresses the relationship of the old and new covenants, the old and new testaments. He is especially good (in my view) on the relationship of the law to Christ and the incompleteness of the old order — aspects of John's Gospel which even a swift-footed exposition of it is bound to encounter.<sup>9</sup>

#### Practical Christian living

Deeply embedded in Calvin's theology is the correlation of (i) Christ's work, (ii) the Spirit's ministry as the one who brings all of Christ's resources to the Christian, and (iii) faith as the bond of union the Spirit forges between the believer and Christ. The important statement opening *Institutes* Book III: 'as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us'<sup>10</sup> is, in John, given positive explication. Indeed, this is the significant nexus in Calvin by means of which Christology and practical Christian living are related.<sup>11</sup>

#### Divine sovereignty and election

Calvin, predictably, pays careful attention to John's emphasis on divine sovereignty and predetermination. Here he is helpful in ways that may surprise the new reader. In the *Institutes*, he is providing a guide to biblical theology for Christians. Yet even there his major focus on predestination lies within the context of his exposition of how we receive the grace of Christ (Book III). Indeed it seems to be deliberately located at the end of Book III as one of three ultimate dimensions in Christian experience — divine election, prayer, and the resurrection.

In the *Commentary on St John*, however, Calvin is able to expound election in the context of the teaching

Christ. That may seem to be an obvious and trivial thing to say, but a little reflection will indicate how easily preaching from the Gospels can focus more on 'what this passage says *about us*' than on 'what this passage says *about Christ*.' We all too easily leapfrog over the Scriptures to ourselves and our own situation and needs without giving adequate attention to expounding the character and work of Christ. Here Calvin becomes a companion to keep our eyes fixed on Christ 'clothed in the garments of his gospel' (to use his own beautiful expression).

#### Harmonisation

Calvin approaches the question of harmonisation with great sanity. In principle he does not feel bound to be able to harmonise everything. There

of our Lord. This gives him (and other preachers) two advantages. The first is that it is the teaching of Jesus himself he is expounding. Some of the emotional difficulties (prejudices?) Christians experience with election begin to dissolve when we hear it taught from the lips of Jesus. Secondly, it becomes clear that Jesus taught this doctrine largely within two contexts: (i) the need for his disciples to be encouraged; (ii) his own rejection by the religious unconverted. This does not diminish the full blown divine sovereignty to which Calvin is committed, but it enables him to set it within a personal, spiritual, moral context rather than an abstract metaphysical one.<sup>12</sup>

### **Exposure of hypocrisy**

This last note brings us to a further striking aspect of Calvin's treatment. He is especially powerful in his exposing of hypocrisy. He well grasps the thread running through the first half of John's Gospel of ongoing opposition to and hatred of Jesus by those who wore the mask of true religion. And since he sees continuities between the Old and New Covenant churches, Calvin is able to apply this in a contemporary way with considerable rigour. He speaks from very painful and profound experience at this juncture. But his exposition is not a sudden blast of vituperation. He very carefully works God's word under the skin of hypocrisy and irresistibly unmasks it. 'Even if the whole world should boil over in rage, we must proclaim God's glory' is his watchword.<sup>13</sup>

### **The burdens of ministry**

Finally, Calvin's exposition is full of telling passages and a substantial number of one-liners which leap out of the page at the preacher to indicate that here is a man who has sat where he sits, struggling with the great task of leading the flock of Christ, bearing with their infirmities and seeking to lead them to maturity and fruitfulness through the ministry of the word. Not only is his understanding of the labyrinth of the human heart profound,

but his empathy with the burdens of the minister of the gospel is enormously encouraging.<sup>14</sup>

## **3. Particular Illustration**

The best brief way to demonstrate the value of Calvin for preachers is to examine one particular chapter of the commentary as a kind of *hors d'oeuvre* to whet the appetite. While John's Gospel will be preached through perhaps only once during years of ministry, for most preachers Easter comes round once a year, with its concentration of sermons on one theme. John chapter 20 should therefore provide us with a test case broadly applicable sooner rather than later.<sup>15</sup>

In what follows Calvin's exposition will be filtered in order to indicate the suggestiveness of what he writes. He will not write your sermons for you (and ought never to be allowed to!), but he does sit down alongside you in your preparation, like a teacher saying:

*He very carefully works God's word under the skin of hypocrisy and irresistibly unmasks it*

'See that? See this? What can you make of this aspect, and that, of the text?'

His comments fall fairly naturally into four sections:

### **The Discovery of the Resurrection 20:1-10**

(i) Calvin draws our attention here to the sheer abundance of evidence for the resurrection. Like Paul (1 Cor. 15:5-8), he is impressed by the force of the resurrected Christ's appearances.

But why did Jesus appear first to women, whose position in contemporary society was so low? Calvin's response is not to deny the presupposition but to reject the implied deduction: Precisely (!)—this is the way God works (1 Cor. 1:28).

(ii) He deals with the question of the relationship between this account and that of the other Gospels, and with a whole series of harmonisation 'problems': the number of women; the difference in time—when did Jesus appear to Mary (which he resolves in terms of different narrative functions); the nature of communications between Mary and John and Peter (in John) and Mary and the eleven (in the Synoptics).

It would be a dreary Easter sermon that explained how problems of harmonisation in the Easter narrative are to be resolved, and a foolish man who preached it! But the positive side of what Calvin does is the way he pieces together the fragments as a whole to provide one unified account of an extraordinary morning. Thinking through these issues with him strengthens the sense of the reality and wonder of the events themselves.

(iii) But it is when Calvin looks at the narrative from the perspective of its lessons for us that his commentary

comes into its own. Noting how remarkable it is that the disciples even went to the tomb, he views it as an illustration of the way in which the seed of faith can be smothered, yet brought to life by an action of the Spirit set within the context of a providential work of God. This drove the disciples back to the Scriptures (e.g. Is. 55:3 interpreted in terms of Acts 13:34; Ps 16:10; 110:1; Is. 53:8) which they had known but did not well understand. Here is one of those instances when an event becomes a 'mirror' of the characteristic working of God — as is also true, for Calvin, of the way in which Peter is slower than John in reaching the tomb, but enters it first — many have more given to them at the end than appears at the beginning!

(iv) There is a striking note on the



## *this encounter with Mary becomes in Calvin's hands a mirror of divine calling*

significance of the linen cloths; they are 'so to say, the slough, which would produce faith in Christ's resurrection'.<sup>16</sup> With solid common sense Calvin comments that you do not strip a body if your intention is to steal it! In John's observation that the napkin which had covered Jesus' head and face lay separate from the linen shroud (Jn 20:7), Calvin finds interesting grounds here for the refutation of such relics as the Turin Shroud.

In different ways these comments surely help to prime most pumps!

### **Encounter with Mary 20:11-18**

In harmonising the resurrection accounts, Calvin concluded that other women were present with Mary, but he rejects the idea that the reason John does not mention their presence is that they fainted. Wise man! Indeed, he chastises the women for their useless weeping.

Primarily, however, this encounter with Mary becomes in Calvin's hands a mirror of divine calling. Here his sense is evident that Jesus never deals with people merely in terms of surface relationships. What we have is a paradigm of what Christ does now through the Spirit.

(i) Mary's understanding is veiled. Christ presents himself to her, but he is not yet recognised. Similarly our minds are covered in folly; we are bewildered spiritually. Mary (like us) is concerned with earthly things (Jesus' body). Like us, there is no room for resurrection in her thinking. So she does not, indeed cannot, recognise him.

(ii) Illumination is given. Jesus' physical appearance is unchanged. But he now assumes the character of Master, and speaks with a sovereign accent. This precisely mirrors the more didactic form of the same truth in John 10:

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and calls them by name in such a way that the sheep recognise his voice and follow him (Jn. 10:3-4,14). Thus, (a) Jesus calls Mary by name. (b) His voice penetrates inwardly, awakening recognition. (c) Recognising Christ as risen, she trusts and honours him.

But if Mary has come to faith, why the insistence on not touching him — especially in view of Matthew 28:9 ('They... clasped his feet...'), and the invitation given to Thomas later in John 20:27? Calvin answers: the grip of Matthew 28:9 was the grip of worship, not of possessiveness. Here Mary's zeal was misplaced, a holding on to his earthly body, a return to the pre-resurrection world. The purpose of the resurrection is not that he should remain thus in this world, but that he should enter into his kingdom and from his throne govern the church through the Spirit.

(iii) A Commission is received. The women return to tell others. Does this ground an argument for women's office in the church, asks Calvin in passing? No, he responds, and provides us with one of his many well-crafted one-liners: Christ never intends what is 'done by a single privilege to be taken as an example'.<sup>17</sup>

Understanding veiled, illumination given, commission received. The movement from reading the passage with Calvin's help to formulating a progressive series of points or stages in exposition and application is — at least in this case — almost painless!

Two interesting further points should be touched on here. Calvin treats the words 'my Father and your Father . . . my God and your God' not as underlining the differentiation between Christ and believers, but rather their adoption into the family of God, whereby they partake of all the bless-

ings that are in Christ. In addition he notes how expressive of God's grace it is that Mary, from whom Jesus cast out seven demons, should be the first human witness of his resurrection. Calvin sees in this God bringing her 'out of the deepest hell to raise her above heaven'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Breathing of the Spirit 20:19-23**

This third section is a well-known crux in Johannine studies. In general Calvin notes the providence of God in gathering the disciples together; but suggests that the closed doors shows their lack of faith. Incidentally, he does not believe that John suggests that Jesus passed through a closed door. And further, he rejects the popular idea of Christ now having 'rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.'

Here three questions are faced which almost invite homiletical formulation:

(i) What is the significance of the event? It is Christ's appointing of the apostles to their ordinary future office. He had been their teacher: now, as his 'sent ones', they are to have the same function, role, and authority.

(ii) What is the meaning of the breathing? It is a symbolic act by which Christ institutes the apostles into their new ministry, putting forth the power of the Spirit. The whole event is a stage *en route* to Pentecost. This was a sprinkling, that an outpouring of the Spirit.

On a polemical note with a contemporary ring, Calvin points out that this breathing belongs to Christ alone, not to men or bishops — who 'boast of making sacrificing priests when they belch over them'! All they do, Calvin notes with obvious relish, is to 'change horses into asses'.<sup>19</sup> It is not too difficult to deduce what his comments might be on analogous practices today.

The overall principle to be emphasised is clear: when Christ ordains to ministry he furnishes with all necessary gifts. The word and the Spirit are conjoined, as always for Calvin.

(iii) In what sense could the apostles

pardon sins? Calvin notes that in this context Jesus is commissioning them to preach the gospel; since pardon is the fruit of their preaching, it must be the means implied. Not auricular confession but gospel proclamation is the instrument of forgiveness. What we need is 'Not confessors who speak in low mutters but heralds who speak up and seal in hearts the grace of the atonement.'<sup>20</sup>

### Confession of Thomas 20:24-29

In this final section, Calvin draws attention to the *scopus* of the narrative of Thomas' unbelief: it serves to confirm the faith of the godly.

Thomas is seen as obstinate, proud, and wise in his own eyes. Yet Jesus condescends to him, not just for Thomas' own sake, but for us. Thomas represents faith buried, which in God's grace is revived — like David's was until Nathan came.

Undergirding this lies another principle. God holds, restrains and keeps his elect by a secret bridle, although in themselves they are as guilty as if they had renounced the faith.

This leads to his comments on Thomas' confession, 'My Lord and my God.' The doubter's recognition of Jesus' incarnate identity leads to a confession of eternal deity. Here Christology from below meets Christology from above! But, Calvin adds, we cannot confess Christ truly as Lord without recognising him as God.

Here again Calvin's 'mirror principle' for drawing application from a narrative passage of Scripture is evident. It should be carefully distinguished from a moralistic and even an exemplary use of the text. It is in fact a Christocentric use. He does not move in his exposition immediately from Thomas to us. Rather, he begins with Christ. He then moves from Christ to Thomas, from Thomas to Christ, and then to us *via* the principle that Christ sends the Spirit to continue the very ministry he had thus begun (cf. Jn. 14:16; 16:7-11). He does not say: Look at the passage, see yourself. Rather the dynamic of his

application is: Look at the passage, see Jesus; understand the Spirit's ministry: now see yourself. This is a helpful hermeneutical safeguard against the unhealthy aspects of a tendency to either moralism or naked exemplarism.

Calvin concludes with notes drawn from the promise of blessing which is given to believing without seeing. First, to clear the ground of any naive misunderstanding, he harmonises this saying with Matthew 13:16. Secondly, he draws from this principle the conclusion that the doctrine of and belief in transubstantiation represent sheer frivolity.

### Conclusion

He closes with comments on verses 30-31: many other signs given to that age were not recorded for us according to John 20:30. For Calvin — and indeed for the Catholic Church — miracles acted as confirmation of revelation. That was why, in the Address to Francis I which prefaced the *Institutes* he had found it necessary to defend his cessationist position over against the Roman criticism that the Reformation gospel had no attesting miracles. Here, as there, he defends the Reformation by pointing out that the gospel is already sufficiently attested.<sup>21</sup> The fact that these miracles have been recorded assures us in an age when miracles are not given that gospel has already been abundantly confirmed once-and-for-all.

The Gospel of John was written that we might believe and have life. This, then, says Calvin, is the chief head of John's teaching: outside of Christ we are dead; by his grace restored. The Gospel as a whole, and each chapter in it, should be read and expounded in this light. Precisely this is what he helps us to do in his treatment of chapter 20, and indeed of the whole gospel. Calvin is not a quick fix, but he is an invaluable companion in the life-long adventure of preaching the word!

**This paper is the substance of an address given at Rutherford House's Calvin for Preachers Week in September 2000.**

### Endnotes

- 1 For background to Calvin as a biblical commentator, see T.H.L. Parker's *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, London, 1971 and his later *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, Edinburgh 1986.
- 2 John Calvin to the Reader, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trs. F.L. Battles, ed. J.T. McNeill, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960, pp.4-5.
- 3 The phrase is Calvin's own. See the Dedicatory Letter to Simon Grynaeus in his Commentary on Romans.
- 4 All references are from *Calvin's Commentaries: The Gospel according to St John*, trs., T.H.L. Parker, eds. D.W. and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh, vol. 1, 1959; vol.2, 1961. For convenience of reference the text on which Calvin is commenting is also given.
- 5 Vol.1, p.5 ('The Theme').
- 6 p.6 ('The Theme').
- 7 Vol 1, p.20. On Jn.1:14.
- 8 For example, his approach to the Temple cleansings, vol. 1. p. 51. On Jn. 2:12-17.
- 9 For example, vol. 1, pp.24-25, on Jn. 1:17; vol. 1, pp.137-9, on Jn. 5:37-39; vol.1, p.143, on Jn. 5:46-47.
- 10 *Institutes*, III. I.1.
- 11 For example, vol. 1, p.199, on Jn. 7:38.
- 12 For example, vol. 1, p.160ff, on Jn. 6:37-39.
- 13 Vol. 1, p.120, on Jn.7:9; cf. also vol. 1, p. 183-4, on Jn. 7:9-13.; vol. 2, pp. 108, 113-4, on Jn. 15:23 and 16:2.
- 14 For example, vol. 2, p.64, on Jn.13:20; vol. 2, p. 104, on Jn. 15:17; vol.2, pp.218-221, on Jn. 21:15-17.
- 15 Vol. 2, pp.191-214, on John chapter 20.
- 16 Vol.2, p. 193, on Jn.20:5.
- 17 Vol.2, p. 200, on Jn.20:17.
- 18 Vol. 2, p.200, on Jn. 20:17.
- 19 Vol.2, p.204-6, on Jn. 20:22-23.
- 20 Vol.2, p.208, on Jn. 20:23.
- 21 *Institutes*, p. 17.

# Sermon on the Nativity with an Invitation to the Lord's Table

JOHN CALVIN

LUKE 2:1-14

**We must begin at his birth**

**W**hen we seek our Lord Jesus Christ to find in him alleviation of all our miseries and a sure protection, we must begin at his birth. Not only are we told that he was made man like us, but that he so emptied himself that scarcely was he reputed to be of the rank of men. There was nothing except a stable and a manger to receive him.

Since it is so, we know here how God displayed the infinite treasures of his goodness when he willed that his Son might be thus humbled for our sakes. Let us recognize also how our Lord Jesus Christ from his birth so suffered for us that when we seek him we need not make long circuits to find him. But let us learn to be abased to be received by him since there must be conformity between the Head and the members. For by nature already we find such poverty in ourselves that we have good reason to be thoroughly dejected. But we must know our real natures, that we may offer ourselves to

our Lord Jesus Christ in true humility that he may acknowledge us as his own.

**Both Servant and Sovereign**

However, we also have to note that even though he took our condition, he was able to maintain his heavenly majesty. Both sides are here shown to us. For our Lord Jesus Christ is in a manger, rejected by the world. He is in extreme poverty without reputation, subject to servitude. Yet he is magnified by Angels who show that our Lord Jesus Christ, being thus abased for the salvation of men, never ceases to be King of all the world with everything under his dominion.

We see on the one hand how our Lord Jesus Christ did not spare himself, that we might have easy access to him and not doubt that we are received even as his body, since he willed to be not only a mortal man clothed in our nature, but, as it were, a poor earthworm stripped of all good. Therefore may we never doubt that, however miserable we may be, he will keep us as his own.

On the other hand, we see him here marked by the hand of God, so that he may be received without any difficulty, as him from whom we must expect salvation, and by whom we are received into the Kingdom of God, from which we were previously banished.

Let us learn how we must come to our Lord Jesus Christ. To be sure, the wise men of this world are so inflated with pride and presumption that scarcely will they condescend to be pupils of poor shepherds from the fields. But it is all our wisdom that we learn from these shepherds to come to our Lord Jesus Christ. For although we may have all the sciences of the world stuffed into our heads, of what use will it be when life fails us? How will it help us to know him in whom the treasures of all wisdom are hidden?

**Humble shepherds must  
be our teachers**

God gave this honour neither to the great ones of this world, nor to the wise, nor to the rich, nor to the nobles, but he chose shepherds. Since it is so, let us follow that order. It is true that

Wise Men came from the East to pay homage to our Lord Jesus Christ. But the shepherds had to come first, in order that all presumption might be abolished, and that he who would be reputed Christian must be as a fool in this world.

### **The faith of the shepherds**

Further, let us look at the faith of these shepherds. Then it will no longer be difficult to follow them. They come to adore the Redeemer of the world. In what condition do they find him? There he is laid in a manger and wrapped in a few little cloths, and that is the sign which had been given to them by the Angel. It might appear this was to astonish them and even make them turn their backs so that they would not recognize Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

For the Scribes and Teachers of the Jews thought the promised Redeemer would come in great pomp, and would subject all the world in such a way that he would have only prosperity. They would get wealth in abundance to glut themselves, and would amass all the riches of the world.

Here, then, was a scandal which could make these poor men lose courage, so that they would never have come to our Lord Jesus Christ, but would have been alienated from him, when it is said to them that they will find him in a stable wrapped in rags. Yet that does not turn them away. They come to know him as Lord, confessing how God has had pity on them and that finally he has fulfilled his promise which he had given from all time.

Since, then, the faith of these shepherds was so great that it fought against everything that could turn them from coming to our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be doubly guilty and stripped of every excuse, unless we learn in their school, and unless the humble birth of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a scandal to hinder us, and unless we come to yield to him as to our sovereign King.

Also see on the one hand how many fanatics reject everything which

is contrary to their brains. On the other hand, see how many mockers have never been touched by any feeling of their sins. Because of their profanity, they think they will never be brought to an accounting, neither do they know there is a better life than the one they presently live. They reckon it is foolishness to follow the Son of God

## ***when a minister preaches in one of our churches, it is not anything much to draw us***

and know him.

How much more then ought we to be strengthened by Luke's teaching: namely, that the Son of God loses nothing of his majesty and glory, and that it is not decreased in his humiliation in rags in a manger for our salvation. Rather we ought to be enraptured by it, knowing his inestimable goodness and the love he has borne toward us.

### **The true obedience of faith**

This, then, is how we must practice this doctrine, that we fail not to come to our Lord Jesus Christ, although at first sight we do not find in him what our natural senses desire. Although he was in rags and in a manger at his birth, may we know he did not cease to be Mediator to draw us to God his Father, to give us an entrance into the Kingdom from which we were entirely shut out. Still more, although he does not rule in pomp, and although his Church is yet despised, and although there is a simplicity in his Word which great men of this world reject, as for us, may we never cease on that account to cling to him and to subject ourselves to his dominion in true obedience of faith.

For example, when a minister preaches in one of our churches, it is not anything much to draw us. We hear but a man speaking who is not of great reputation. There is only the Word. Moreover, in what is preached by the Gospel there are many things which may seem to us to be against all reason if we judge them according to our taste. So let us know we cannot

draw near to what God shows and declares to us, unless we have first bowed down.

### **Water, bread and wine**

As a confirmation added for our sakes to his Word we have the Sacraments. But would a drop of water be enough

## ***God convicts of ingratitude all those who today do not condescend to do homage to his only Son***

to assure us of the remission of our sin, and that God adopted us as his children. Would it assure us that though we are feeble and frail, yet we shall be clothed with his eternal heavenly glory? Could we find a guarantee and assurance of things so great and so excellent in a little water? In the Holy Supper would a piece of bread and a drop of wine be sufficient to assure us that God accepts us as his children, that we live in Jesus Christ, and that he has shared everything with us? It may seem that ceremonies which have no great pomp can have no value.

Therefore, we see still better how to profit from what we are told about the Shepherds. That is, let us not cease to draw near to our Lord Jesus Christ and to be assured that it is he in whom we shall find all good, all rejoicing and all glory, although it seems that he is still, as it were, in the stable and manger, wrapped with swaddling clothes.

There might be many things which could debauch us and dazzle the eyes of a few that they might not perceive the heavenly glory which was given to him by God his Father, I say, even in the human nature he took from us. For since he is God, he has everything from himself (as it is said in John 17), but with respect to his humanity he received as a free gift everything that he brought to us, that we might draw from his fullness, and that we might find in him everything that is desirable, and that we might have all our rest and contentment in him alone.

### **Angels are witnesses to divine truth**

Besides, let us note well that the Holy Spirit also wished to assure us that in following the shepherds who are here ordained as our teachers, we should have no fear of making a mistake. For if the shepherds had had no other sign than the stable and manger, we could say, "Look at the poor idiots who make themselves believe foolishly and without reason that he was the Redeemer of the world".

But the shepherds were confirmed by other means that he who was laid in the manger was the Son of God. That is, when the Angel appeared to them, then they heard this song which Luke adds, where all the Kingdom of heaven renders testimony to our Lord Jesus Christ, that he has all power over creatures in heaven as well as on earth.

### **The wicked are without excuse**

To be assured in the faith of Jesus Christ let us learn, then, to receive all here recorded for us. For it is certain that God convicts of ingratitude all those who today do not condescend to do homage to his only Son, when he sent such a multitude of Angels to declare that he was the promised Redeemer. It is vain to remain in unbelief because we see many stupid people not taking account of all that is contained in the Gospel. There are even mockers of God who are so careless it makes no difference what is preached to them. They pay no more attention than they would to fables.

What of the obstinate and devilish rebellion of all who do not subject themselves to our Lord Jesus Christ to do him homage? Such will have an infinite multitude of angels from heaven who will testify against them. For the angels are the ministers of the truth of God. So then, though all the wicked who are steeped in their vices and corruption, take pleasure in sin and are hardened in their unbelief, they have more than sufficient witnesses to testify their condemnation. For the heavenly angels appeared so that there might no longer be any excuse for us not to re-

ceive Jesus Christ as our sovereign King, humbly bowing ourselves before his majesty.

### **The welcoming arms of God**

However, let us note on the other hand that God procured our salvation when he sent such a multitude of angels. It is so that we might come to our Lord Jesus Christ with a ready courage and no longer be held back by dispute or scruple, but that we might be fully resolved to find in him all that is lacking in us and that he will supply all our wants and miseries. Briefly, it is he by whom God willed to communicate himself to us. Do we wish to seek our life except in God?

There is all fullness of the Godhead in Jesus Christ. When, then, we have such a testimony, it is just as if God extended his two arms to make us feel his inestimable goodness: and to show that only when we have faith in Jesus Christ (I say a faith without hypocrisy), leaning only upon him, knowing that it is from him that we must receive everything, then we shall be sharers of all the benefits which are lacking in us and for which we starve.

### **Bethlehem, the place of his birth**

Next we consider the place of his birth. Here is no slight confirmation. If Joseph and Mary had had their home in Bethlehem, it might not have been strange that Jesus Christ was born there. The prophet had said, "Bethlehem, although you are today despised as a little village, yet you will produce him who is to be head of my people." But when Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth and they came into the city of Bethlehem and Jesus Christ is born there, who will not see that God guided the whole thing by his hand? Men must deliberately be blind when they are not willing to recognize here the Word of God, who marked his only Son, so he could be received without any doubt as him who had been promised.

### **God uses strange means**

True, there was sufficient occasion in

the edict published by the Roman Emperor for Joseph to come to Bethlehem. But to bring there a woman about to be delivered, it is certain that was not governed by man and God was at work. We see how God uses strange means to accomplish his will. For the edict of Caesar made it necessary there was a check upon each person; no longer could they expect any liberty. Jesus Christ was promised to deliver them and all believers from the subjection of Satan and all tyranny. It might have seemed that this edict is closing the door to what God had promised his people. However, the edict is the means of accomplishing it! For when Joseph and Mary come as poor people subject to an unbelieving tyrant, and Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem, it shows the prophecy to be true. God here gives full certainty to his own so that they must not doubt the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## ***peace and joy are inseparable***

That, then, is how we must apply to our use and instruction the things here discussed. For it is not the intention of the Holy Spirit who spoke by Luke simply to write a history of what happened. He expresses here on the one hand how the Son of God did not spare himself for our sakes, and then on the other hand how he bore infallible testimony that he was the Redeemer.

### **The message of the angels**

Let us profit from and be in tune with the angels' song in glorifying God, and so receive what he here gives us for the rejoicing of our souls. First the Angel says, "Fear not. I announce to you a great joy." Second there is this testimony from all the army that God sends, "Peace on earth to men."

### **Joy in Christ alone**

First, we seek our joy in Jesus Christ.

For though we had all kinds of delights and luxuries, it would only be a matter of drowning ourselves in pleasures. Yet even if we are entirely stupid, our conscience will never have rest. The worms of which Scripture speaks will eat us away, we shall be condemned by our sins, recognizing that with perfect justice God is our enemy. So, there will be a curse upon all the enjoyments of the world, since they will be changed into gnashing of teeth, until and unless we are right with God.

Cursed then are all enjoyments, honors and things desirable, until we feel that God received us in mercy. Being thus reconciled with him, we can enjoy ourselves, not only with an earthly joy, but especially with that joy which is promised to us in the Holy Spirit found in him. For peace and joy are inseparable.

In Adam we are children of wrath. God being our Judge is armed with vengeance to cast us into the pit. What joy can we conceive of in such a state? Without God, not only will we be overcome with unrest but we will be in torments which surmount all the anguishes of this world. We see many, bewitched by the devil, who do not cease to make merry, although they make war on God. But if we have a single particle of feeling in us, it is certain that we shall be in deep distress until God is declared favorable toward us.

### **Christ our peace**

Peace comes when we know that God owns us as his children, not imputing to us our sins. Are we thus at peace with God? Then we really have something over which to rejoice! Unbelievers have a kind of peace: they are so thick that they are not concerned about the judgment of God; they even defy it. But their peace is not with God. For they never have peace nor rest, except when they forget both God and themselves and are altogether insensible. But St. Paul exhorts us to have peace with God, to look to him. How can we be assured of his love? By the forgiveness of our sins, by the free unmerited love which he bears toward

us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Note well that the peace the angels preach carries with it this joy, of which the first angel spoke, "I announce to you a great joy". Christ is called our Peace, and this title declares that we would be entirely alienated from God unless he received us by means of his only Son. Today, we only repeat the preaching done by the multitude of angels. That is why the Angels exhort all the world to glorify God, since he has given such a peace on earth.

We rejoice, then, that God has freed us by means of our Lord Jesus Christ his only Son: he has taken possession of this peace, that praises may ascend on high, piercing the clouds, that all the world may re-echo this song and God be blessed and magnified everywhere.

### **Praise from assurance**

We deduce from this that we shall never be able to praise God until he has made us experience his goodness. How shall poor sinners, full of remorse, who do not know whether God loves them or hates them, be able to bless his Name? On the contrary, anguish will restrain them from opening their mouths. First, God must knowingly testify to us the love he bears toward us in such a way that we may be assured he will always be Father to us. Then we shall bless his Name.

### **The true song**

However, let us not have an idle faith, but may we be incited to bless the Name of God when we see that he has so displayed the great treasures of his lovingkindness toward us. May our mouths perform their function, and then may our whole life correspond to it. For this is the true song, that each dedicates himself to the service of God, knowing that, since he has bought us at such a price, it is reasonable that all our thoughts and works bless his Name.

When we know that we really are his own, it is because it has pleased him to accept us, for everything proceeds from his unmerited bounty. So not without cause is added the word that peace is given to men, not for any

merit or because they had acquired it, but by the good pleasure of God. For the word which Luke uses means that we must not seek any other reason why our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to us than that God has had pity and compassion on our miseries.

### **God and Man in us**

The message brought by the angels is as a burning lamp to show us the way, faith leading us, that we know that it is now God *in* us, as much as it is God *with* us. God with us is declared when he willed to dwell in our human nature as his temple. God in us is as we feel him joined to us in greater power than when he showed himself mortal man. He is both God and man in us. For first by the power of his Holy Spirit he makes us alive. Then he is Man in us, since he makes us sharers of the sacrifice which he offered for our salvation, and declares to us that his flesh is truly

*let us hold it as a  
certainty that we shall  
never cease to have  
peace toward our God*

meat and his blood truly drink.

This is also why the holy table is made ready for us now, so that we may know our Lord Jesus, having emptied himself, was not however separated from us when he ascended into his glory. Rather it is on this condition that we are sharers of his body and blood. Why so? We know his righteousness and obedience is the satisfaction for our sins and that he appeased the wrath of God by the sacrifice of his body and blood which he offered in this humanity he took from us.

### **Invitation to the Lord's table**

Therefore, when Jesus Christ invites us to this table, although we perceive only bread and wine, may we not doubt that he really dwells in us, and that we are so joined to him there is nothing of

himself that he is not willing to communicate to us. We must recognise this to profit from the Sacrament he has established for us. Whenever we receive it, may we know that God could have delivered us from the depth of condemnation by another means if he had so willed. But he willed to give us more assurance of the love which he bears toward us when we have Jesus Christ for a Guarantee and seek all our good in him.

### **All our sadness sweetened**

This is how our Lord Jesus Christ must be applied to our salvation, if we wish to approach God and desire to have real spiritual joy, contentment and rest; also if we desire to be armed against the temptations which the devil stirs up. But to be sharers of this holy table, let us examine ourselves, and let us in the first place recognise our miseries and be entirely confounded by them.

Moreover, let us know God willed to sweeten all our sadness and anguish when he shed himself abroad in his only Son, and that he willed that we should enjoy him fully. Although we are subject to poverty in this world and besieged by enemies who are like ravenous wolves, though the devil on the one hand ceases not to seek to prey upon us and unbelievers bark like mastiff dogs, although, I say, we are agitated by many troubles and menaced from all sides, let us hold it as a certainty that we shall never cease to have peace toward our God. Let us ask him to make us experience peace by his Holy Spirit "peace that surpasses all human understanding" and let us so learn to be content with our Lord Jesus Christ and the spiritual benefits of which we partake, that we may be able to bear patiently the afflictions of this world.

May it not be too much for us to be molested and exposed to shame and disgrace, provided that Jesus Christ is with us to bless our afflictions so that we gain such fruit from them we realise in all our poverty we ask nothing except to glorify our God. And when worldlings gain their triumphs to their confounding, since they cannot enjoy

themselves without fighting against God, may our true joy be to serve him in fear and humility, and to give ourselves entirely to his obedience. That is how we have to profit from this Scripture.

Now we shall bow in humble reverence before the majesty of God.

**This sermon was originally 6400 words, but has been edited for the Rutherford Journal. It has been chosen for this issue of the Journal since it exemplifies clearly the point made in the Editorial regarding the doctrinal structure under-girding the preacher's treatment of the text. While there is rather more "framework" in this sermon than we normally find in Calvin's expositions, much of the material reflects the ferocity of the contemporary persecution of the reformed churches.**

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## A thought for Christmas

# “Stillness”

When I thought of buying Christmas cards this year, the message “Peace” was the best I could find. What I really wanted was a card with the word “Stillness” somewhere in the poetry.

“Peace” can be a negative word meaning the absence of noise or conflict in, for example, a heated argument. Stillness, however, is a moment when something positive is about to happen.

Stillness in Nature is the silence of dawn when the birds stop singing before the sun rises; or the silence in a wood when the wind drops away and the leaves hang.

In ordinary life, stillness can be a group waiting for something important to happen, for example, before the bells ring out for the Millennium.

More seriously, it will certainly come at some point over the Christmas Season to us all. When everything is more or less done, that stillness will descend upon us. We may imagine that something else has caused it, such as our own sheer tiredness, or the children having just gone to bed.

This stillness is a signal not of absence, but of a Presence. It is the silent announcement of a miracle about to happen — God with us, just as silently as the snow falling outside.

So be ready to recognise that moment when stillness breaks through and touches you.

*Albert Calder.  
December 1999.*

# Belonging and Believing

ANDREW BATHGATE, UCCF, EDINBURGH

It has become commonplace in the last 8 to 10 years to assert that the church requires to abandon its traditionally held view that belief is the doorway to belonging<sup>1</sup> and to recognise that a sense of belonging is the more usual stepping-stone to belief. This approach questions whether it is right to expect commitment to Jesus Christ and to key doctrinal statements of the faith to predate involvement in the life of the Christian community and suggests rather that as someone feels they belong so they begin to form and develop belief.

## **Believing before belonging**

It is not difficult to demonstrate that 'belonging' prior to a clear faith commitment has not always been an idea encouraged amongst evangelical churches. The distinction between the morning service for 'believers' and the evening 'gospel' service is just one indication of that, while the erection of wooden rails in some church buildings to 'fence' the table highlighted that some people did not belong! Although this kind of approach has been much less marked in the historic denominations, little has been done there to make allowances for anyone coming into church from an unchurched culture. The onus is on the seeker to

adapt to the patterns of the church culture before they can belong.

## **Belonging before believing**

However, today the challenge is to make *belonging* the priority so that those who have not yet come to believe still feel part of the Christian community, are able to be involved, and can even in some way contribute to the life of the community. Some use the 'journey' image to encourage Christians and not-yet Christians to journey together in search of the truth.<sup>2</sup> The desire is that people will be drawn to belief as they participate in the life of the faith community and experience an acceptance which in some way mirrors God's love. This article seeks to examine the claim and to investigate some of its implications.

## **Arguments for belonging before believing**

There are at least five main arguments raised to criticise the believing-belonging model and to lend support to the belonging-believing model.

### **1. The witness of scripture**

It is claimed that the Hebrew, as opposed to the Greek, model of learning always inextricably linked belonging and believing. Whereas Greek thought tended to emphasise thinking first fol-

lowed by action, the Old Testament builds on an integrated model in which there is no belief outside of belonging and where reality is known through obedient commitment.

The example of the Lord Jesus in relationship with his disciples is another oft-quoted example of belonging preceding believing. The disciples were called to be with him (Mk. 3:14) and became part of his circle long before their understanding caught up with that experience. Their questions, misunderstandings and lack of faith all point to a growing belief arising out of an experience of developing relationship with Jesus.

Phil Wall puts great weight on Jesus' request for a drink of water from the Samaritan woman.<sup>3</sup> He argues that an attitude of 'can you help me please?' drew the woman into a relationship into which Jesus could then speak truth. These arguments carry a certain weight and have significant practical implications. More work needs to be done, however, in determining how the experiences of Israel and the disciples relate to contemporary, non-Jewish evangelism and what additional light Acts and the Epistles might throw on the subject. This would undoubtedly reveal a much more complex picture in which the believ-

ing/belonging model is clearly evident.

For example in Corinth in Acts 18 (cf. 1 Cor. 1 & 2) the emphasis is on Paul exclusively devoting himself to preaching (v.5) and teaching (v.11) the word of God leading to believing (v.8) and thence to belonging signified by baptism (v.8). (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:2 and 1 Cor. 12:13). All we need to say at this point is that the belonging/believing model is a valid biblical model even if it is not the only or necessarily best model.

## 2. The testimony of new 'believers'

What do most people claim was the major factor in their coming to faith? All the evidence points to the powerful effect of Christian friends, family and the wider Christian community. John Finney's *Finding Faith Today* gives statistical backing to anecdotal evidence. Belief was seldom mentioned as the starting point of new found faith. Rather the influence of a Christian or Christians usually began the process.<sup>4</sup> Paul Weston states that for most people becoming a Christian is a 'process in which a person gradually comes to share and adopt the outlook of a group of Christians whom they have got to know'.<sup>5</sup>

Further evidence comes from Eddie Gibbs' summary of the common factors involved in ten growing churches. Meeting felt needs in the community, meeting people where they are, and providing a way into the fellowship are highlighted. 'The newcomer soon begins to feel that he or she belongs' is Gibbs' description.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. The over-emphasis on the intellect

Robin Gill sets out his case against the believing-belonging model by stressing that intellectuals become so concerned with thought that they are apt to forget that 'in matters of faith, belonging is primary'.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Paul Weston's starting point in reflecting on how people find faith today is that 'very few people reason their way to faith'.<sup>8</sup>

Gill quotes Methodist research from the 60s which he uses to show that crisis of belief was not a major factor in explaining why people leave churches or do not maintain church member-

ship when moving to another area. This survey of lapsed members showed a very small percentage who claimed 'loss of faith' as their reason for leaving. Gill sums up the two major contributory factors as 'apathy and mobility' not crisis of faith.<sup>9</sup>

Recent study by psychologists also calls into question the role of the intellect in the process of learning. The *behaviour follows attitudes* model has given way to a more complex understanding in which it is recognised that attitudes can equally be moulded by adopted behaviour patterns. 'We are as likely to act ourselves into a way of thinking as to think ourselves into action' say Christian psychologists Myer

knowledge, sociologists have grasped this critical importance of our social context for what we believe. They argue that what we see and how we understand what we see is a complex construction formed out of an interlocking set of social relationships. Some go on to claim that we do not 'find' ourselves independently but only through other people and involvement in institutions. 'We discover who we are face-to-face and side-by-side with others in work, love and learning.'<sup>11</sup>

As Christians we may not feel that is the whole story but we can surely agree that for both Christians and seekers the community of faith does become a plausibility structure which

## *the believe-belong model tends to underplay the importance of community*

and Jeeves.<sup>10</sup> This opens up the possibility that faith can be a consequence of action, an argument supported, according to Myers and Jeeves, by Jesus' words in John 3:21: '...whoever lives by the truth comes into the light'.

Additionally, putting the primacy on believing, it is argued, has the tendency to neglect the whole person and can leave evidentialist apologetics open to a 'so what?' response. It fails to bear marks of reality and plausibility because it comes as truth in a neat form without proper context.

These challenges to our mindset will be picked up below.

## 4. The neglect of community

A further criticism of the believe-belong model is that it tends to underplay the importance of community while the alternative model relies almost entirely upon it. The former tends to focus on individual belief.

The huge importance placed on fellowship/community/family in the New Testament is not difficult to demonstrate. See, for example, Ephesians 1:18,23; 2:11-22; 4:3-6, etc. It is within that context that faith grows and people understand Christ's person and God's love (John 17:23).

In their studies in the sociology of

enhances faith and provokes questions. In other words, the fellowship of believers helps (or should help) the claims of the Christian faith to ring true and when and if this is so, belonging becomes fundamental to belief.

It should be pointed out that not all advocates of the belonging-believing model argue for the importance of community. Ted Harrison in his book *Members Only* argues that the church is becoming too exclusive. One of his major concerns, however, is that the church should provide for those who want to express a strongly individualistic and perhaps ill-defined faith. He regrets the move from the emphasis on the individual soul to the concept of being a member of a 'community'.<sup>12</sup> His concept of 'belonging' is much more about feeling that the church is 'there' for people whether that ever leads to saving faith or not.

## **The contemporary world**

Finally, the belonging-believing model, it is argued, fits best with contemporary society. Pragmatically, it fits with where we are in the 21st century.

A sense of belonging answers the *fracturing of relationships in society*. The popularity of tv programmes like

'Cheers' in the '80s and 'Friends' in the '90s rests on the vicarious experience of genuine relationship. Places that provide genuine friendship and acceptance are highly prized and answer to isolationism and individualism in our society. This longing for relationship sits alongside a cynicism and suspicion about authority and truth claims. Hence the need for truth to be heard in the context of relationship, openness and acceptance.

The success of the Alpha Course has been put down at least partly to its emphasis on belonging, the meal and small group times being given high value. Feedback from the congregations using Alpha usually highlights

(i.e. Christian faith) in later life'.<sup>14</sup> Prof. David Wright feels the claim is overstated but carries enough truth to demand reflection. Ministers sincerely seeking to aid people in their sense of belonging to the Christian community through accepting children for baptism may have unwittingly contributed to alienating people from belief.

Another dimension to this concern is the phenomenon seen most often amongst young people where entering into the warmth of Christian fellowship is mistaken for genuine Christian commitment. Community is of huge importance but can be an attraction in itself without ever leading to anything deeper spiritually. The burgeoning

David Wright laments the underplaying of baptism amongst evangelicals which means that we have lost the dimension it brings of marking a boundary between the church and the unchurched, the Christian and the non-Christian.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the desire for 'belonging' one cannot simply ignore the dramatic images of difference between 'before' and 'after' conversion, the renouncing of sin and the putting on of Christ.

The resurgence of interest in Celtic Christianity with its open structures and strong sense of seeing God revealed in all of creation could be a negative influence at this point. Could the belonging/believing model in fact be near to the stance attributed to Celtic Christians and through them to George McLeod and the Iona Community<sup>20</sup> by Ian Bradley in his book *The Celtic Way*. He characterises that approach as one which 'eschews... the crude question, 'Are you saved?'<sup>21</sup> in favour of an understanding which, with Pelagius, sees intrinsic goodness in people and therefore works 'not so much... to bring the gospel to every creature [but]... to bring all mortals to the awareness of the love and purpose of God already present in creation, already breaking through'.<sup>22</sup> Is there perhaps a danger of our losing something of the need for dramatic transformation?

Of course, the belonging/believing model does not inevitably lead to any of these dangers, and similar dangers can arise when believing becomes detached from life, but past history and present experience tends to point up the potential pitfalls associated with a misunderstanding of belonging. That awareness does not necessarily mean we can altogether discount the model but **perhaps a better model would be one which saw 'belonging' in the sense of 'acceptance' leading to believing and thus to a far deeper spiritual 'belonging' in the New Testament sense of truly being born into the family of God.**

## *Is there a danger of us losing something of the need for dramatic transformation?*

friendship/relationship as the thing most appreciated.

### **Major Dangers**

These 5 reasons seem to provide a strong set of arguments for the superiority of the belonging/believing model over the believing/belonging model. However, we need to probe little further to ask whether it is quite so straightforward. Much depends on what we mean by 'belonging' and how it is interpreted by seekers. We must state that a wrong understanding of belonging/believing has at least two major dangers:

#### **1. Belonging can become a substitute for believing**

'As presently practised, church membership militates against conversion,' says Dr Campbell-Jack.<sup>13</sup> This reflection from the Church of Scotland can be interpreted to say that the feeling of belonging stops at that stage and never reaches the point of believing faith. From a Church of England perspective some have argued that indiscriminate baptism of infants has created massive obstacles to the evangelisation of England in that it has 'inoculated generations of English men and women against catching the 'real thing'

church in the USA may also reflect this same trend.<sup>15</sup> This should not surprise us of course since it chimes in with the Parable of the Sower and the seeds which lack rootedness and defence against thorns.

At some point people do need to appropriate certain truths. They cannot remain 'unspecific and unfocused'.<sup>16</sup> They need not fall into Harrison's caricature of being satisfied with 'instant answers' but they must nevertheless believe there is an answer and acknowledge that explicitly. In practice of course that will almost always happen within a community context.

#### **2. 'Belonging' can negate the radical nature of Christian commitment**

This follows from the first point. The New Testament interestingly often talks about conversion in terms of 'believing'<sup>17</sup> but the overriding theme is transformation.<sup>18</sup> This is not to suggest that this always occurs at a crisis point or that it is complete on conversion but it is clear that there is a step to be taken which involves repentance, faith and inner renewal with resultant translation into the new community of God's people.

### **Major challenges**

This (perhaps more) biblical model

should not be allowed to disguise the fact that the renewed emphasis on belonging faces us with some major challenges. It needs to be acknowledged that, although great claims are made for the novelty of this approach, in some respects it makes explicit what has for long been best practice in evangelical witness. Even if the idea that faith is 'caught not taught' is overly simplistic, it certainly has a long pedigree and gives some indication of how evangelism has been approached.

Given this, there are still important ideas to be considered. In general terms it challenges us that we have not sufficiently emphasised 'belonging' (both in the sense of 'acceptance' prior to faith and in the sense of being born into the family of God through faith) in our teaching and we have not consistently supported the truth by our communal life. This raises at least five issues for us.

### **1. We have shown partiality in our acceptance—**

It was back in 1816 during a mini-revival in the city of York that 400 people from a very poor background became Christians and were added to the Methodist church in the city. However, the congregation did not grow by that number due to the loss 'chapel respectability' and the consequent defection of large numbers to other independent churches.<sup>23</sup> That sad story is not so different to the way certain groups of people are treated today in many church contexts. Whether it be the poor, those discovered not to be heterosexual in their orientation, or those with special needs, we still tend to be selective in our willingness to communicate value and acceptance. Here Harrison is right in his denunciation of some attitudes to the unchurched and in his challenge for the church to find ways of serving the whole community in Christ's name.<sup>24</sup>

### **2. We have tended to discourage questions—**

Elizabeth Templeton laments the lack of honesty in churches and calls for 'freedom to be truthful with one another with questions of faith'.<sup>25</sup> There is no need to go as far as those who

almost make doubt a prerequisite of Christian faith but we do need to create places where no question is too simplistic or too dangerous to be asked. Schaeffer's point is well made that the Christian faith if it is true can withstand any onslaught.

None of us claim to have all the answers and few would claim to be doubt-free but the impression given is too often one which stifles inquiry and the concept of search. We need greater humility and openness.

### **3. We have expected conforming behaviour—**

Following on from both previous points we have tended to expect people to adopt 'Christian' behaviour when coming amongst us and any divergence from the norm has too often been greeted by a judgmental attitude. Philip Yancey tellingly relates the story of the woman hopelessly trapped in drug addiction and prostitution who even goes to the extent of hiring her own young daughter to paedophiles for sex to finance her habit. When it was suggested to her that she go to a church for help her response was, 'Why would I want to go there, I feel guilty enough already!'<sup>26</sup>

Sadly, the perception of the church is as a group where people will be re-

which people learn (cf. Myers and Jeeves). We have not always given due weight to the biblical doctrine that faith without works is dead: people have not really learned something until it changes their behaviour and then that behaviour reinforces their learning. Neither have we given enough consideration to the contexts in which people will learn.

### **5. We have emphasised individualism to the detriment of corporate experience—**

Many more recent authors have commented on the dearth of understanding of the church in the West and particularly amongst evangelicals. We have rightly valued and pressed for individual conversion and personal knowledge of the Lord but at the same time have largely failed to communicate the high value placed on corporate life and unity in the New Testament. Witness our almost constant reading of 'you' in the New Testament as singular when it is more often than not plural! Inevitably this has a knock-on effect in evangelism. The very term we use, 'personal evangelism', says a great deal about how we view ourselves: lone witnesses rather than working in partnership. In our communication of the gospel we fail to

## ***we do need to create places where no question is too simplistic or too dangerous to be asked***

pelled until they have cleaned up their lives sufficiently to be accepted. The lesson of Jesus' handling of Zacchaeus needs to be relearned. As Luke relates the story there is acceptance by Jesus (going for a meal with all its implications of friendship) prior to any statement of repentance by Zacchaeus.

### **4. We have been good at 'teaching' but less good at living—**

An assumption that underlies much evangelical ministry is that if the 'teaching' is right everything else will fall into place. This is a dangerous partial truth which probably results from our over stressing of the intellect and not recognising the complex ways in

stress the corporate implications of believing. We even sometimes dissuade people from looking at the church on account of its ugly flaws and warts. This may be understandable but it reflects our low view of corporate Christianity.

Garber in his attempt to discover the key elements that keep people faithful to commitments made in their student years cites the company of mutually committed folk, 'a network of stimulation',<sup>27</sup> as one of three major factors. We must take this kind of belonging more seriously.

This is an appropriate point to note, however, that our cherished views of

what it means for people to belong will undoubtedly come under even greater challenge as the century wears on. If William Storrar is correct we face a situation in which people 'will want to attend worship from time-to-time, or become involved in some specific area of church life, without taking up membership in the traditional sense'.<sup>28</sup> We will need to ask ourselves about the biblical expectations of being part of the people of God and how that transfers to church commitment. We will need to be flexible enough to help people along part of the journey before passing them on to other people. We will need to reconsider how best to integrate busy people into church life. It is part of learning to live in a church without walls.

Harrison ends his book by quoting the Archbishop of Canterbury's experience in Papua New Guinea. On his visit to that country he visited a cathedral which had a roof but no walls. People came and went, some joining the service for a short period on the edge of the crowd then wandering off again. He presents this as an image for the church: a church without walls.<sup>29</sup> George Carey looks for a 'church with blurred edges where people can ask their hardest questions without con-

- regular teaching which emphasises the corporate nature of Christian commitment
- modelling of this teaching in the structures and programmes of the church
- constant challenges to the complacency which excludes certain people and groups
- church activities which are not only open to all but are made understandable to all
- the growth of a genuine humility which is open to learn and develop our faith in the context of core certainties
- an equipping of Christians to build genuine friendships with those who have not yet come to saving faith in Christ
- a fresh embracing of the understanding that people learn much through their own articulation and practice
- the willingness to allow people to serve us<sup>31</sup>

Even if we take the best from this model we are left with a huge challenge in mission. Helping people 'belong' assumes they come within our orbit in some way. Many will remain well outside our present circles of influence and never come near enough us to feel any sense of belonging unless we take a new approach in engaging

ble Society 1992)

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## ***We have emphasised individualism to the detriment of corporate experience***

demnation and share their deepest fear without reproach'.<sup>30</sup> Without in any way suggesting that the belonging/believing model will answer all our questions surely we can heartily support that vision.

### **A church without walls**

We need to ask ourselves what this church without walls will look like? What changes do we need to make so that people do not feel repelled, second-class or trouble-makers but can come around and know that they are valued?

Some of the basic things that may need to be incorporated are —

with our communities, building sacrificial friendships and sharing with them not only the Gospel but our very lives (1 Thess. 2:8).

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### **Endnotes**

1 Wall (1999)

2 See e.g., Harrison (1994), p.124, Wall (1997).

3 Wall (1999) p.133. Cf. Wall (1997).

4 David Searle (1996) quotes a survey of 5000 Christians which showed 80% had come to faith through being attracted to a warm, loving fellowship.

5 Weston (1996) p.9.

6 Gibbs (1984) pp.22-26.

7 Gill (1994) pp.27,28.

8 Weston (1996) p.9.

9 Gill (1994) p.30.

10 Myers and Jeeves (1991) p.169.

11 Garber (1996) p.145 quoting Bellah.

**(Belonging and Believing, cont.)**

- 12 Harrison (1994) p.36.
  - 13 C.Campbell-Jack (1999) p.16.
  - 14 Wright (1996) p.55.
  - 15 See comments in Robinson
  - 16 Harrison (1994) p.3.
  - 17 John 1:12; 1 Thess. 1:8; Rom. 1:8,16, 1 Cor. 1 21, 15:2,11, etc.
  - 18 France (1993) p.300.
  - 19 Wright (1996) p.56.
  - 20 See Bradley (1993).
  - 21 Bradley (1993) p.108.
  - 22 Bradley quoting John Harvey on George McLeod p. 108
  - 23 Smith (1998) p.31.
  - 24 Harrison (1994) p.114.
  - 25 Quoted in Harrison (1994) p.124.
  - 26 Philip Yancey, *What's so amazing about grace?* (Zondervan, 1997) p.11.
  - 27 Garber (1996) p.37.
  - 28 Quoted in Palmer (1999) p.24.
  - 29 The expression comes from Zechariah 2:4.
  - 30 Harrison (1994) p.126.
  - 31 Wall (1997) makes an interesting, if possibly sexist, point when he says that one way of overcoming our failure to reach men is to recognise that men like to do something, they like to fix things! He suggests a strategy in which they are involved in some way alongside Christian men in work together.
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# GRIEF

## BILL WEBSTER

*In this first of a series of articles on the importance and practicalities of a grief support ministry, Bill Webster examines the social context in which death and grief occur. In future articles he will outline the issues with practical suggestions as to the establishment of effective community grief support ministry programmes.*

Grief and loss have been a part of the human experience from the beginning of time. A more recent phenomenon, however, has been the emergence of grief counsellors to assist people in the aftermath of their loss. Every time a tragedy or disaster happens, it is reported that grief counsellors are on hand to support the victims. Many people ask, 'What did people do before grief counsellors? Why do we need them? Can't family, community and churches look after the needs of the bereaved?' These are good questions and they deserve to be answered.

### **A death-denying culture**

We live in a society in which death is not part of the business of living. This has been described by some as a 'death-denying culture'. One of the certain things in life is death, but, while we know this intellectually, we have somehow decided not to acknowledge it or talk about it in the

normal course of events. As Margaret Mead succinctly puts it:

When someone is born, we rejoice.  
When someone is married, we celebrate. But when someone dies, we pretend that nothing has happened.

Just a few generations ago, the situation was different. Death was very much a part of life and living. Never an easy part, admittedly, but something that people experienced and regarded more naturally. When our grandparents were children, they grew up seeing their elderly relatives growing older, getting sick, and dying, often at home surrounded by family.

Most children would have their first experience of death when they were quite young — sometimes a parent or grandparent — but often a sibling or a peer. In the early 1900's over half of all deaths recorded were of children under 15 years of age.

In the absence of our modern medical technology, people tended to die of illnesses which today are regarded as routine in terms of effective medication. And, significantly, these experiences of ageing, sickness and death happened with people who were close to those around.

Not to over-sentimentalise this, or paint a rosy picture of 'the good old days', death and loss have always been difficult experiences. But even when



# AND LOSS

death inevitably did occur, dying was usually in the context of family and community life.

Things have changed over the years. We live in a very different world to our grandparents. I'm not saying this is good or bad, right or wrong. It's just different. Things like ageing, sickness and death most often do not occur at home nowadays. We've institutionalised most of that; thus we can distance ourselves from it. We are less familiar with death, because it tends to happen in a nursing home or hospital.

Let me suggest just a few of the changes that have occurred in our society.

## **Families have changed:**

While it was not uncommon for families to live together in one community a few generations ago, today tremendous geographical distances often separate us. We live in a very mobile society; where the average person changes geographical locations six times in their life. This change in family structure means that families often are not always present for each other in times of crisis. Thus where or to whom does someone turn in such times.

## **Communities have changed:**

One of the outstanding characteristics of contemporary society is the emphasis on individualism. In this 'culture of rugged individualism' we have become

increasingly isolationist. Yet, we still speak fondly of community, longing for the 'good old days' when neighbours would gather together to help. Our hearts still swell when a community comes together and responds magnificently in a tragedy or a crisis. The problem is that once the crisis is over, all too often, so is the community. Yet we are people who need people. Scott Peck says,

We are desperately in need of a new ethic of 'soft individualism', an understanding of individualism which teaches that we cannot truly be ourselves until we are able to share freely the things we have most in common: our weakness, our incompleteness, our imperfections, our inadequacy, our lack of wholeness and self-sufficiency ... [This] is the kind of individualism that makes real community possible.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, because we live in a mobile, individualistic society, we may not have the life long friendships, the sense of community or family relationships of other generations.

People today tend to be more isolated. Ask yourself, to whom could *you* turn in moments of crisis or need. Many people today feel they have *few* people with whom they are close, and to whom they feel they could turn for support in times of need.

Here I make the point that if families and communities have changed and the fabric of relationships with them, where *can* people turn? Many turn to the professional: the counsellor, the clergy, the health practitioner or the social worker. These become, to use Robert Fulton's phrase, 'surrogate family, surrogate community, and often, surrogate grief'.<sup>2</sup>

## **Religious & Spiritual Values have changed**

The last fifty years have seen a decline in church attendance and the influence of religion on the community at large. Increasingly missing from our society are many of the rituals, rites of passage and expressions of faith which for generations past have provided meaning and a sense of continuity for the living.

Today, in many areas, there is even an increasing trend away from funeral rituals. People who have not been religious in life see no need for a service.

I believe from my own experience that religious ceremonies can have enormous value in offering support and comfort, as well as bringing meaning and closure to such a situation. Indeed, whether religious or not, we cannot over emphasise the importance and value of finding some creative way to memorialise the person, and ritual is one very effective tool. I have encountered many people who, six months after the death, wish they had

done something more meaningful to help them bring closure.

#### **An unhelpful theological shift**

I have also discerned in recent years a shift in some theological circles which has focused more on concepts of triumph, victory, and God's blessing on his people. One can observe this transition in the words of many hymns and spiritual songs which are currently popular. (I realise the perils of confusing theology with hymnology, but simply offer this as an observation and ask you to draw your own conclusions.)

The hymns I grew up with reflected the themes of fight, struggle, storms and overcoming such adversities in the strength of God. Is it just me, or do some of the modern songs seem to reflect the idea that the battle is won and the struggles over? Did I miss the establishment of the millennium or something? It is only my opinion, but I worry that such a one sided view, however biblical the concepts, may leave the people for whom life is difficult, facing adversity, and struggling with loss, with the feeling that they have been overlooked or abandoned by God, and guilty that they are not seeing the joy, the blessing and the victory that others sing about and are rejoicing in.

#### **Medical technology has changed**

Medical technology has made huge advances in the last 50 years or so. There have been huge advances in antibiotics, new drugs and medications, heart transplants, organ donations, x-ray & scanning technology, lasers etc. And while there are still many medical hurdles to be cleared, this has led to an important shift.

#### *Prolongation of life*

People do not tend to die immediately from illness. Physical life can be prolonged for months or even years. This can provide its own special problems and stresses. It is significant that people are living longer, yet there is an enormous increase in diseases, like Alzheimer's, that lead to mental debilitation. This, interestingly, leads to a grief process among family members who grieve the loss of the person they

knew, the persona; yet cannot grieve openly or acknowledge the loss because the person is still biologically alive.

#### *A cure for everything*

We have developed an attitude that there must be a cure for everything.

or deal with well.

#### **Conspiracy of silence**

If we live in a culture that denies or avoids the reality of death, it is hardly surprising that we would also deny the significance of grief. The same factors

*there is an increasing interest in a science called Cryonics. This is the technology that allows a person to be frozen in a state of suspended animation, hopefully to be revived when their disease or their ageing can be reversed*

As expectations of a healthy life through medical technology increase, the thought of dying becomes ever more unnatural. Oh, we know that there are diseases for which medical technology has not yet found the cure—cancer, AIDS, and many others. But stop and think for a moment. Don't most of us hold in our hearts the idea, 'It's just a matter of time till the cure is found'? When someone gets a terminal disease, they begin hoping the cure will be found in time, and then if not, that perhaps *their* case, or their autopsy will provide the breakthrough. It's just a matter of time.

In fact there is an increasing interest in a science called Cryonics. This is the technology that allows a person to be frozen in a state of suspended animation, hopefully to be revived when their disease or their ageing can be reversed. In other words, we live in a generation where death, far from being a certain part of life, can possibly be delayed or even postponed.

In such an atmosphere, with our expectations that medical technology can solve all our health problems, the thought of dying is no longer seen as part of the business of living. Rather than regarding it as an inevitable part of life, we have somehow embraced the idea that death is a kind of *failure*. Any failure, in our success oriented world, is something we don't take too kindly,

that affect our attitude towards death influence and even aggravate society's attitude towards grief. Grief, which is the normal reaction to any significant loss, is often minimised and unmentioned. People seem reluctant to recognise the painful process of grief. The messages they give the grieving person are conflicting.

We commonly hear statements like, 'You must be strong; pull yourself together; you mustn't cry; life must go on'. We haven't learned what is normal and what we can expect after a significant loss. We rarely talk about the subject of death or the reaction of grief except in the immediate days surrounding a funeral. We have often failed to validate the long term process of grief, or legitimise the experience. When people find themselves unavoidably confronted with loss and struggling with grief, it can be one of the most difficult experiences of life. The social factors we have described that make the subject of death and loss difficult for us, also create a *conspiracy of silence* when it comes to grief.

Thus, the grieving person may feel abandoned at a time when they need social and spiritual support the most. Those grieving may not be as close to their families, because of geographical distance or other factors, and even many families who are together have the idea that they have to 'be strong'

for each other, which in itself can create some unique family dynamics. They may not have many close friends, or life long relationships — people with whom they feel comfortable sharing heartaches.

### Marginalised

Those who regard grief as pathological, treating it according to a sickness model, give a very specific message to the person who is struggling to come to terms with their loss, and feelings that they are 'abnormal' or even 'crazy' are not unusual. And if the spiritual climate encourages the person to 'rejoice' because their loved one is in a better place, but feelings of tears and despair are their experience, it makes for a dissonance that seems to pull the grieving person in different directions. Little wonder that the root of the word 'bereaved' means 'to be torn apart'.

All this, however unintentionally, leaves the grieving person feeling marginalised. A marginalised person is someone whose normal, social identity is vulnerable and changeable and their social position is unclear and ambiguous. Living at a distance from society, norms or ideals, their self identity is affected because of the perception of others that they are 'different'. They may feel they are not living up to people's expectations to 'be strong', and

indeed not living up to their own expectations that 'I ought to be able to handle this'.

The outcome of all this is that grief is often regarded as something of a failure. C.S. Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed*: 'An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet.'<sup>3</sup> Many people think of themselves differently after a loss. *Where can they turn for help?* One important place is to a community grief support group. Such a programme can offer grieving people information, encouragement and empathy in the context of a caring community, and support them through this most difficult human experience. These, then, are some of the factors that make up the social atmosphere in which we live. They are vital in helping us understand current attitudes towards death, loss and the reaction we call grief. And I have not even touched on the influence that the media has on our perceptions of these issues, both from the perspective of the news media, and that of the Hollywood dramatisations of situations of death, loss and grief.

Society may encourage us to deny the reality of death or minimise the importance of grief yet this very attitude can lead us to forget one very basic truth: *Death may end earthly life,*

*but it does not rob it of meaning.* People's lives affect and change us. Someone's death, especially those closest and dearest to us, always affects us. Any time someone affects my life enough to change it in a positive way, I will miss the presence of that person in my life after they are gone.

Yet many people weeks, and even months, after the actual event of the death of their loved one may feel abandoned and that they are going crazy. Sometimes it is when people think they should be getting themselves together they may feel they are falling apart. And that is the dilemma in grief. It's just we haven't learned what is normal after a loss. It's just that we don't know where we can turn or to whom we can talk.

**(Dr Bill Webster grew up in Arbroath, Scotland, underwent theological education at London Bible College, and was a pastor in Canada for some years. After the death of his young wife in 1983, he struggled to come to terms with his loss, as well as with the practical tasks of looking after his two sons, then only 9 and 7. After working through these issues, Bill returned to university and completed a degree in psychology before embarking on his doctoral programme. He is now involved in a specialised ministry as a grief counsellor, offering support and encouragement to people after a significant loss. To find out more about Dr Webster's resources of the Centre for the Grief Journey, check his web site at <<http://www.griefjourney.com/>> )**

### Endnotes

- 1 Scott Peck *A Different Drum*, (Touchstone, Simon and Schuster Ltd 1987), p.58
- 2 Robert Fulton, 'Anticipatory Grief, Stress and the Surrogate Griever', in J Tache, H Selye and S Day (Editors) *Cancer, Stress and Death* New York: Plenum, p.6.
- 3 C S Lewis *A Grief Observed* (Faber & Faber, 1966), p.11.

# Reluctant joiners

## being church in a culture of non-commitment

ANDREW ROLLINSON

*We live in a society of 'reluctant joiners'.<sup>1</sup> There are clear signs that today's culture is increasingly becoming a culture of non-commitment. For 'Generation X'ers' (20-30s) in particular, there is a deep suspicion of a call to commitment of any kind and a strong hesitation about getting involved in anything that smacks of an 'institution'. If you are street-wise you simply 'don't get tied down'.*

**The aim of this article is to seek to examine and understand this trend, and then to draw out some implications for the church, an institution which traditionally calls for a high level of commitment. We are to find that this seemingly straight-forward task will take us back to the very heart of both the Gospel and what it means to be church. It is recognised that the issue to be examined here is just one of many factors that have profound implications for the future of the church.<sup>2</sup>**

### Non-commitment

**E**vidence for 'a culture of non-commitment' is not hard to find. It is seen in every aspect of contemporary society. Couples are

increasingly choosing to opt out of marriage commitment. In Britain cohabiting has more than doubled in the last twenty five years<sup>3</sup>, and almost one in two marriages end in divorce. Charities are finding that the traditional loyal donor is being replaced by individuals responding to specific one-off appeals. All political parties in Britain have seen a fall in party members, particularly dramatic among groups like the Young Conservatives. Trade Unions and other mass-membership institutions struggle to enlist lifetime membership, and traditional voluntary organisations report a large drop in volunteer recruitment. Employers, fearing unstable markets, are reluctant to make long term commitments to their employees; short-term contracts are the order of the day.

### Short-term action groups

This is not to say, however, that commitment *per se* is out. Commitment to work is clearly a hugely important feature of many, though even here a new generation are less enamoured with the habitual over-employment practices of the 1980's and 90's. Equally commitment to family and friends is significant, and allegiance to special interest groups and short-term action groups is mushrooming. What *has* drastically changed, however, is commitment to meta-systems of beliefs and

macro secular institutions, and this is what obviously has implications for the church. David McCrone puts it clearly, 'Lower-case politics (protest) and lower-case religion (spirituality) are vibrant. Parties toil for members, while action and protest groups flourish. Churches atrophy and decay, while sects burgeon.'<sup>4</sup>

### Rota Christians

Recent statistics on church attendance are well known and bear this out. It is estimated that the Scottish churches are losing, on average, about one congregation per week (200 members) and have been doing for some time.<sup>5</sup> At the local church level, anecdotal evidence also suggests a hesitation about commitment. For example, it is now not uncommon for a 'committed church member' to come to worship once every two to three weeks<sup>6</sup>. It has been disparagingly put that we have a parallel phenomenon to 'rice Christians' — the 'rota Christians', who turn up to services only when they are on duty!

In our Baptist churches we find many young converts happy to be baptised, but deeply reluctant to see church membership as a necessary biblical implication. People are keen to come to a ten-week Alpha course, and even post-Alpha groups, but wary about getting drawn in to the wider

life of the sponsoring church. Many churches are now finding it difficult to get younger people to take on major leadership roles.

### **Post-denominational climate**

On the broader church canvas, we clearly live in a post-denominational climate. Many lively Christians simply find commitment to a national ecclesiastical institution singularly irrelevant. One fascinating window on this is the renaissance of interest in cathedral worship. Most British cathedrals report a huge increase in their Sunday congregations. One such attendee offered the illuminating comment, 'Here you can have Gregorian music without being asked to run the Brownie pack'!

### **An endangered species**

Another aspect of all this is that it is now recognised that the 'career missionary' is an endangered species, whilst the number of 'overseas short-termers' has never been so high. This trend also seems to be reflected in ministry at home. In the Church of Scotland, for example, the number of ministerial candidates in training has plummeted from 181 in 1992 to 56 in 1999.<sup>7</sup> The drop is probably related, in part at least, to fears about a lifetime commitment to pastoral ministry.

It is in this culture that we are called to be the church. To bury our heads in the sand or simply to 'berate the uncommitted' is not an option, if we are at all serious about serving Christ. Rather a sharp and immensely important question is posed for us, a question which has attracted worry-

ingly little attention in recent reflections on the church.<sup>8</sup> *To what extent is the church, as God's new society, called to live counter-culturally in this climate of non-commitment, and to what extent is it to adapt to it for the sake of effective mission?*

It is a particular expression of the classic missiological question, 'Where does effective cultural engagement end, and unhelpful cultural conformity and compromise begin?'

## **Causes of a culture of non-commitment**

Our starting point in looking beneath the surface causes of this culture is an attempt to understand sympathetically possible factors in shaping our present 'reluctant joiner' society. Of many contributory factors, five deserve particular comment.

### **1. 'Too tired for commitment' — our exhausted society**

For many people, life is simply overwhelming, and we have become a nation of weary individuals. Long working hours, pressured and insecure jobs, the demands of travel and family, and the speed of change in society all contribute to this tiredness. It is estimated that in half of all working age families in Britain both parents are now out at work. Stress-related illnesses are endemic. As one social commentator describes, 'The modern world is a 'run-away world'; not only is the pace of social change much faster than in any prior system, so also is its scope, and the profoundness with which it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behaviour'.<sup>9</sup> A crucial and urgent question for the church, therefore, is: 'In what ways are

we called to be *good news* for such a society?' 'How and where exactly is the 'rest' and 'freedom' of the Gospel to be embodied, modelled and offered?'

### **2. 'Too unsettled for commitment' — our rootless society**

We are increasingly evolving into a nation of nomads. Individuals and families move to where they can find work, and the more this happens the fewer will be the geographical roots of future generations. In addition, the commuter lifestyle of many means that more and more communities become literally dormitory towns, with little sense of neighbourliness and minimum local allegiances. As Graham Cray comments, we are now a culture 'of many encounters but few relationships'.<sup>10</sup> All this has significant practical implications for local church life. Particularly hit by this trend are national churches. As William Storrar comments about the Church of Scotland, 'Patterns of family life and community life have been swept away; and with them the social basis for maintaining the Kirk's communal membership'.<sup>11</sup>

### **3. 'Too uncertain for commitment' — our image-orientated society**

The issues here go far deeper than purely a loss of 'where we are'. They involve 'who we are'. For many people, as the overarching coherence to life crumbles, so does the sense of *personal identity*. In post-modern 'speak', the 'grand narratives' of our lives are rapidly becoming, through such things as high mobility and the break-up of family life, simply a series of 'unrelated short stories'.

What is more, personal identity is increasingly seen as a social construction, where we take on different roles and postures at different times. Image often seems to be more important than integrity. The consequences are that it leaves us paralysed, frivolous, and confused, and in no position to make serious commitments.<sup>12</sup> 'Instead of long-term commitment, the post-modern self just moves on — to the next game, to the next show, to the next relationship. This is a nomadic

*in a recent Navigator survey across Europe of student attitudes to Christian discipleship — their results show that students are no longer asking of Christianity 'Is it true?' or even 'Does it work?', but 'Do I like it, and would I feel comfortable with it?'*

self, on the road with the carnival. The post-modern self is thus ultimately homeless.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. 'Too wary for commitment' — our suspicious society

Today we are witnessing a generation profoundly distrustful of authoritative institutions. Trust is a fundamental requirement of any committed relationship, and it is in serious short supply. People are wary of being conned, manipulated and abused. Such is the power of the media that memories of such scandals as the 'Nine O'clock Service' in Sheffield live long in peoples' minds. In a recent piece of research at Edinburgh University, it became clear that many teenagers viewed religious leaders as 'perverts, puritans and prats', and these negative perceptions had clearly been reinforced by soap opera characterisations.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5. 'Too choosy for commitment' — our consumer society

Our post-modern society is fundamentally a consumerist society, a 'cable culture', where we sample channels and choose products according to mood.<sup>15</sup> Shopping is now Britain's number one leisure activity, and the shopping mall has become the new village green. Lying at the heart of such consumerism are essentially two things: personal choice, and a desire for pleasure. Thus there is an individualism and a hedonism which asks of any relationship or potential commitment 'What is in it for me?' This is precisely what was discovered in a recent Navigator survey across Europe of student attitudes to Christian discipleship. Their results show that students are no longer asking of Christianity 'Is it true?' or even 'Does it work?', but 'Do I like it, and would I feel comfortable with it?'<sup>16</sup>

Truth itself has become a commodity. It is popularly conceived that there are no ultimate realities and therefore no moral absolutes. Moral stances are all socially constructed and relative. Perhaps the only agreed universal now is the barring of religious intolerance. It is for us to choose the lifestyle, the religion, the morality that best makes sense for us. It is this climate, as Graham Cray states, that 'all commit-

ments must be provisional, if not temporary, because they are rooted in irony rather than conviction.'<sup>17</sup> What counts, or so it seems sometimes, on the religious front is the 'spiritual feel-good factor' rather than the Gospel call to self denial and the way of a cross.

This attitude clearly affects church life at all sorts of levels. Shopping for churches is now commonplace, preferably with the "Good Church Guide" in your hand!<sup>18</sup> This may be understandable, and even to be recommended, when someone moves to a new area. However, it becomes deeply disturbing when it is merely because the religious buzz at one church has waned, or the minister has offered an uncomfortable Gospel challenge. At a less glaring level, but perhaps therefore even more insidious, is the very common desire to see church as a 'pit stop for personal spiritual re-fuelling' rather than as 'a committed community that models authentic relationships.'

Perhaps this is the point where we should begin to plot a way forward.

### A way forward

#### Re-imagining the church — a missionary response to a world of non-commitment.

A true biblical response must be a missiological response: 'How can we be the church today in a way that *both* embraces *and* redeems the present culture of non-commitment? How can the church offer an attractive alternative to a culture of non-commitment, whilst being good news for such a culture?

#### A. Tasting grace in a weary world

It has been baldly claimed that the

'greatest barrier to the gospel in contemporary Western culture is the church'.<sup>19</sup> However defensive we may want to be, there is sufficient truth here to cause much reflection — and repentance. The crucial starting point in any missiological response to a culture of non-commitment must be *theological*, not pragmatic. Only a gracious God, not a demanding religious club, will turn the heads and hearts of a commitment-shy world.

This is of fundamental importance. Awaiting today's weary prodigals is a welcoming Father, not a celestial recruiting officer; and the church must not only proclaim that but live it. C.H. Spurgeon once told the story of visiting a church member's home with a gift. The elderly lady in question did not answer the door. She thought it was the rent man and had no money! It is an eloquent parable of how society responds today.

Put another way, it is important, as we begin a response, to *clarify the nature of authentic Christian commitment*: to whom and to what is loyalty required? Far too easily and frequently, commitment is articulated in terms of 'doing' rather than 'being'; attending meetings rather than an authentic 'meeting'. Christianity is about God, in Christ, meeting us, calling us and embracing us with an unconditional covenant of love. Jesus said 'You did not choose me, but I chose you'.<sup>20</sup> It is about God's extraordinary initiative of grace; 'we love because he first loved us'.<sup>21</sup> It is about unworthy people being wooed and won by a missionary God.

Our commitment is always a response, never the prior action. Commitment without grace is never good news. And this calling of grace

***Only a gracious God, not a demanding religious club, will turn the heads and hearts of a commitment-shy world***

is also fundamentally a *corporate* calling. The church, *the ecclesia*, are those 'called out' by God to follow Jesus Christ *together*. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that unless the accent is placed in this way, the church will never be the magnetic community of good news she was first empowered to be.<sup>22</sup>

This seemingly obvious point is far too infrequently reflected in our own Baptist ecclesiology. Traditionally, we make a great deal of the idea of covenant, and this is going to be a fundamental part of our response.<sup>23</sup> However, what is important to stress here is that unless it is carefully articulated, it becomes purely a *voluntarist* way of speaking, and puts the emphasis in the wrong place.<sup>24</sup> The church is never simply a free association of independent individuals. It is a gathered and gathering community, *where God does the gathering*.<sup>25</sup> In other words, there is a need for an ecclesiology that is 'from above' as well as 'from below'.<sup>26</sup> A true biblical understanding of the church must be grounded in the Triune God himself. We are those who are 'in Christ', 'one in Christ'; our life in the church is a fundamental dimension of our salvific experience. And this happens through the work of the Spirit, who leads us to share, by grace, in the Son's filial relationship with the Father. Thus, the church is to be seen as a real participation in the life of the Triune God. As such, the church's immensely high calling is to be, in Colin Gunton's phrase, 'a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is'.<sup>27</sup>

### **B. Discovering adventure in a colourless world**

A second major response is to return to the theme of covenant relationships. What is non-negotiable in any culture is the importance of *fidelity in relationships*. It is here where our emphasis on commitment must lie, and nowhere else. Only when churches make this crystal clear will progress be made. Central to all discipleship are relationships. Discipleship is personally

following Christ to the point that we are like him, and not least, in our relationships with each other. In a world thoroughly tired of remote management, impersonal institutions and lonely living, to be called into fellowship with those following Christ is genuinely good news. The earliest followers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer'<sup>28</sup> — and they were glad about it!

## ***Though our culture, as stated, is tired of formal commitments, it is not weary of the challenge of true adventure***

Gerald Coates, leader of the Pioneer stream of New Churches has recently commented, 'The churches that seem to be growing are those that make the biggest demands upon its members *with respect to their expectation for discipleship*'.<sup>29</sup> Here lies the paradox the church desperately needs to grasp. Though our culture, as stated, *is* tired of formal commitments, it *is not* weary of the challenge of true adventure, even costly adventure. Such is the call of Christ to follow him that though it involves the profoundest of commitments, — denying ourselves and taking up the cross,<sup>30</sup> — it brings with it the scent of freedom and the fresh air of true hope. People are actually desperate for a cause to live by, and there is a new generation so far away from Christianity that they are genuinely fascinated by this cause.

### **Five practical implications**

Relational discipleship is thus absolutely crucial for mission in today's culture. The models of the church that are making most impact are consistently those that place a very high premium on relationships.<sup>31</sup> There are at least five practical implications that flow from this emphasis.

*First, for many post-modern people, there needs to be a credible committed relationship of the church to its neighbourhood before the call of Christ will be seriously heard. One*

of the clear conclusions of the English Church Attendance Survey was that it is those churches that address the real needs of the community that tend towards growth.<sup>32</sup> Fly-by-night 'evangelistic church raids' are liable to produce fly-by-night church attendees. Only long term costly social involvement will give opportunity for long term discipleship relationships to be nurtured.

*When this community is truly open to God's grace and Spirit, such is the adventure they enjoy in following Christ that the world forgets it is meant to be allergic to commitment and asks how to join in*

*Secondly, much greater care must be given to allowing non-Christians to hear the call of Christ before any other demands are placed on them.* This is a very important issue in some of our churches, where we all too easily label people, ask them to conform, and agonise over whether they are 'in or out'. *Our welcome and inclusiveness as churches must always be independent of where people are in their faith-journey.* The way of Christ was to call people to a radical and exclusive discipleship, whilst at the same time allowing people to relate to him at different levels. For churches with a clear and high view of church membership, there is a need to be, as Stuart Blythe recently articulated, 'committed at the core but open at the edges'.<sup>33</sup> Dave Andrews expresses the same thing in his plea for churches to move from a 'closed set perspective' to a 'centred set perspective'. The Centre is Christ, and more important than doctrinally policing the periphery is facilitating a movement towards this Centre.<sup>34</sup> This is where *Alpha* and *Emmaus Road*-type courses have proved so helpful.

*Thirdly, participatory worship must be at the heart of discipleship.* Far too many discipleship methods underplay the importance of the transformational act of worship. There is evidence that

early Christian worship was modelled around both celebrating and imitating the Living Christ, present whenever there is a gathering in his Name.

*Fourthly, and related to this, it is essential for discipleship training to be offered that models the very relationality that lies at the heart of discipleship.* Discipleship that is done by sermon or classroom teaching alone has little future. It must be based around friendship, hospitality, 'caught rather than taught' methods, and looking at real life issues.

*Finally, there is a need to re-discover the centrality of the Lord's Supper.* Uniquely at this eucharistic meal, we celebrate the Father's grace, we meet the risen Christ, and we participate in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. If only this meal could be celebrated with its intended power and freshness, counter-cultural covenant commitment would naturally grow.

### **C. Experiencing community in a lonely world**

In a society of hurting and broken people, the church's high calling is to be the most therapeutic society in the world; a healing community where our uncertain, decentred selves can be redeemed.<sup>35</sup> It is to be a place of nurture and encouragement, of fun and freedom. (In a recent extensive church growth survey they stumbled upon the fascinating incidental statistic that there is a strong correlation between the frequency of laughter in a church and its health and growth!)<sup>36</sup> What is so important, however, is that for the church to be all this *it must be thoughtful, flexible and resourcing.* This is the third major response the church is being called to make.

### **Small groups**

Key to such flexibility and resourcing is the role of *small groups*; and the friendship, hospitality, prayer and pastoral support they offer. In recent church growth research across many nations it has emerged that the most important growth factor was the existence of 'holistic small groups'.<sup>37</sup> Larger churches simply will not be all they are called to be unless the context for nur-



turing real friendships is there. The only two viable missiological alternatives are *either* to keep the churches small (i.e. church planting) *or* to be serious about developing a cellular church body. A crucial part of the reason for this is the importance of ownership through every member participation. The 'service-provider' mentality produces little sense of belonging. Thus, the identification and deployment of spiritual gifts will always be a key issue.

Equally, *much creative thought is urgently needed over our church programmes and structures*. Housegroups, for example, that start at 7.30pm and involve two hours expounding Zechariah are hardly going to be commitment-inducing for the Christian business-woman whose husband collects her from the airport at 8.00pm after a 12 hour working day! How many churches have 9-10pm, 'coffee-and-cake', short, light, but Christ-centred homegroups for exhausted professionals? Do we tap into such things as the growing interest in 'book-reading groups'? Committees and other groups need to have a defined life-span for people to feel safe.

The expectation of 'two-services-on-a-Sunday' is now rapidly dying. The appropriate response, however, is not to ask, 'How can we win people back to another service?', but rather, 'How can we better resource our members for the demands of the week ahead?'. This may simply be to give conscientious church members permission to put their feet up at home! Equally, it has to be said that many churches have not thought creatively. Sunday nights, for example, can be an ideal context for varied, short, highly relational and inspiring worship or Christian education.

### **Equipping rather than exhausting**

This leads, finally, into the need to focus on *the church being a resource for the real worship and ministry of the week, which is Monday to Saturday in the home and workplace*, rather than the church as 'yet one more pressure in a pressured week'. Once people who, in 'a culture

of non-commitment' are very committed to their work and family, realise that the church is very serious about equipping rather than exhausting them, they, in turn, may become more serious about the church. This is to be balanced with the church challenging members about an all-consuming work ethic, where the principles of Sabbath, spiritual disciplines and 'putting first the Kingdom of God' are ignored.

Only the Living Triune God can call our distracted world back to himself. But he chooses to do so through a community of frail people, called the church. When this community is truly open to God's grace and Spirit, such is the adventure they enjoy in following Christ that the world forgets it is meant to be allergic to commitment and asks how to join in.

### **Endnotes**

- 1 A phrase taken from Rob Warner's excellent booklet 'Shaping Tomorrow's Church. Mission in the Twenty First Century' 1999 Hertfordshire Baptist Association. 'Autonomous post-modern individuals are reluctant joiners, unwilling to identify lifelong with a particular denomination, which seems an anachronistic and unnecessary tradition, obsolete in an age of ecumenism 'from below'. 'p. 8.
- 2 For an overview of the issues, see Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*. Reforming the church in the post-Christian West, SPCK 1998, Chapter 4 'The weariness of the church'.
- 3 For example, between 1979 and 1993 the proportion of non-married women aged 18 to 49 who were cohabiting doubled from 11 to 22 percent. About half of couples getting married for the first time in the late 1980's reported they had cohabited prior to marriage, compared with only 4 percent in the 1960's. *Population* London H.M.S.O. 1995
- 4 David McCrone 'The Post-Modern Condition of Scottish Society' in *Theology in Scotland*, p.16
- 5 Peter Brierley and Fergus Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000: Trends and Tables from the 1994 Scottish Church Census*, Christian Research 1995
- 6 *Religious Trends No. 2 2000/2001* Millen-

nium Edition. Edited by Peter Brierley. Harper Collins.

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- 11 William Storrar, 'Understanding the Silent Disruption' *Theology in Scotland*, p. 33.
- 12 Roy Kearsley *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* Volume 17.2, p.124
- 13 J.Richard Middleton and Brian J Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it used to be, Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, SPCK, 1995 p.58
- 14 Reported by Jolyn Mitchell 'Transforming Media Literacy' in *Transmission*, Bible Society Publication, Autumn 1999 p.12
- 15 See *Christ and Consumerism - A critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, edited by Craig Bartholemew and Thorsten Moritz, Paternoster Press 2000.
- 16 Quoted in Graham Cray *op.cit.*
- 17 *ibid*
- 18 See Kenneson P.D. and Street J.L. *Selling out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing*, Nashville, Abingdon 1997
- 19 Michael Riddell *op. cit.* p.57
- 20 John 15:16
- 21 1 John 4:19
- 22 Acts 2:42-47
- 23 John Smyth (c.1565 -1612), the father of English General Baptists, defined the church as 'a visible communion of saints.... two, three or more joined together by covenant with God and themselves.... for their mutual edification and God's glory'..... The true form of the true visible church is a vow, promise, oath or covenant betwixt God and the saints'. W.T. Whitley (ed) *The Works of John Smyth* (1915) p. 252 See also 'Bound to Love -The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission' by Fiddes P., Hayden R., Kidd R.L., Clements K., Haymes B. The Baptist Union, London, 1985
- 24 cf Volf, Miroslav *After Our Likeness. The church as the image of the Trinity*, Eerdmans 1998, p.176.
- 25 *ibid* 'The church is a mixture of the social

type that Max Weber called 'church' into which a person is born, and the social type he called 'sect which a person freely joins.' p.180.

26 *ibid* p.177

27 Gunton Colin 'The church on earth: the roots of community' in *On Being the Church. Essays on the Christian Community* by D.W. Hardy and Colin Gunton T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989. p.75

28 Acts 2: 42.

29 Church trends. Which way now? Article in *Christianity* March 2000. Italics mine.

30 Mark 8:34

31 Michael Riddell *op.cit.* p.169

32 See Peter Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out — What the English Church Attendance Survey Means*, 1999

33 Stuart Blythe 'Committed at the core and open at the edges' in *Scottish Baptist*, Feb. 2000

34 Dave Andrews *Christ-anarchy — discovering a radical spirituality of compassion*, Lion 1999, quoted in Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, 'Notes in the Margin' *New Ways of being the gathered church*, Hertfordshire Baptist Association p.12.

35 Middleton and Walsh *op.cit.* 'This is a vision of life that will replace the decentred, multiphrenic self of modernity with a biblical understanding of the self as empowered and responsible agent in community'. p.191

36 Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development Book*, British Church Growth Association 1999 p.37

37 *ibid* p.32

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## KANSAS PRAYER

When the Rev Joe Wright was asked to open the new session of the Kansas Senate, everyone was expecting the usual politically correct generalities. But, what they heard instead was a prayer, edited below, delivered with grace yet full of truth. The response was immediate; on the one hand a number of legislators walked out during the prayer, but on the other hand thousands of people telephoned to express their support.

"Heavenly Father we ask Your forgiveness. We know Your Word says, "Woe on those who call evil good," but that's exactly what we have done and we confess that:

*We have ridiculed the absolute truth of Your Word  
and called it pluralism*

*We have endorsed perversion and called it an  
alternative lifestyle.*

*We have exploited the poor and called it a  
lottery.*

*We have neglected the needy and called it  
self-preservation.*

*We have killed our unborn and called it  
choice.*

*We have neglected to discipline our children  
and called it self-expression.*

*We have abused power and called it political  
savvy.*

*We have coveted our neighbour's possessions  
and called it ambition.*

*We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and  
called it freedom of expression.*

*We have ridiculed the time-honoured values of our  
forefathers and called it enlightenment.*

*Search us, O God, know our hearts today; cleanse  
us from every sin and set us free in the Name  
of Your Son, the Living Saviour Jesus Christ.*

*Amen."*



## Ann Allen meets George Russell

**Most Scots have heard of “Scotland the Brave”, perhaps not so many are aware of “Scotland the Brand”. In an office just off George Square in Glasgow I met Mr “Scotland the Brand”, otherwise known as George Russell.**

**ANN: George, obviously in this present job you have to be a Scot, but where in Scotland are your roots, physical and spiritual?**

GEORGE: I trace my roots to West Lothian and a mining community where my father, apart from being a miner, was a first generation Christian, coming to faith about the same time as my grandfather. So my earliest recollections are of scrubbed and earnest miners filling our home in an evening pouring over the bible and displaying a great appetite for God’s word. The bible was the main topic of conversation. My introduction to spirituality was observing these men, after a long hard day at the pit, wrestling with tough texts and difficult passages, quar-

rying a message from them. My father shared the bible so naturally in conversation with us. Looking back I’m not so sure how accurate his observations might have been, but they were fascinating and I drank them in.

When my father’s health broke down, we moved to Glasgow and I have been there ever since.

**ANN: So did you just grow into faith or was there a time when you made a decisive a step of faith?**

GEORGE: Well I was always interested but I think I was about 12 when I realised that Christianity was serious and I needed to be serious about Jesus and I made a commitment after a missionary rally. From then there has been for me a spiritual journey.

**ANN: Was there ever a point when you considered full time service for the Lord?**

GEORGE: No, I can’t say that I did. I did pray and wonder about a missionary call but it was not for me and so my Christian service has been as a layman in Scotland over many years.

**ANN: At the moment your spiritual home is Allander Hall and I’m wondering if you have always been associated with the Brethren because back in the mid 20th Century, the Brethren would have been very different from some of its congregations today.**

GEORGE: That’s certainly true. We settled in an assembly in Whiteinch when we moved to Glasgow and my Christian life has always involved service in that denomination. Two things always attracted me about the Brethren set up, the importance we place on Jesus, and the centrality of the bible. Obviously there were weaknesses too. The Holy Spirit didn’t get too much of a look in although there was clear teaching on the biblical doctrine of the Spirit.

**ANN: What would you identify as the strengths of the Brethren movement when you were a young man?**

GEORGE: There was a tremendous opportunity for service and the developing of people’s gifts. There was the

chance to speak and to preach, although the down side was that not everyone was given the chance or maybe had the gift for it! There was a pooling of abilities and gifts and people gave unstintingly of their time and talents. It was a great time to be a fledgling Christian. We were pushed into studying the Bible for ourselves and driven into activities. That probably produced some casualties but I think far more success stories spiritually. I developed an “unofficial” kind of youth group in our assembly. I was asked to take over Saturday night open air street preaching by someone in St George’s Tron and for 10 years, 40 or so young people met together one evening to study and pray together and then on Saturday night we hit Garnet Street and Dalhousie Street in central Glasgow and reached out to the crowds. That was where I met Moira, my wife. Over the summers as organising secretary of S.C.E.M., Scottish Christian Evangelistic Mission, established in 1965, we sent between 300-400 young people out on mission to places in Scotland where gospel preaching was in short supply.

**ANN: The brethren movement has undergone something of a transformation in the last 25 years. I take it George, that this is something you have welcomed and endorsed?**

GEORGE: Very much so. The cluster of Assemblies which have not embraced change will have a hard time surviving although no doubt some may. Those which have embraced change have seen growth and development. We are living in an age where people live with short term contracts, huge mortgages, both spouses work and the pace is faster and more hectic in every way. If you surveyed the pool of Christian labour given to crusades and outreach in Scotland over the last 50 years a high percentage of those involved would be from Brethren circles. The great strength of the Brethren movement was its massive pool of unpaid labour. Now with so

little time to give to concentrated study, we need to make more use of trained ministry. People are paid in spiritual work in Brethren circles, a massive shift. Denominational barriers have lost much of their significance and there is greatly increased collaboration round the essentials of the faith.

**ANN: That has been evident in Milngavie where churches across the denominations including your assembly have been involved in an exciting and imaginative programme of events through the millennial year.**

GEORGE: We have staged a really successful programme which has been a great ecumenical venture and widely welcomed. Alongside that we have been running Alpha courses in Allander and over the last year or so have seen 18 people come to faith.

**ANN: With all this involvement and commitment to church and evangelism how did you find time to develop a secular career?**

GEORGE: I left school at 15 with no formal qualifications, and went to work for the Anchor Line which gave me a basic grounding in international trade. I studied at night school, accounting, management and Scots law. After 5 years I moved to the Glasgow Meat market — possibly one of the toughest places to operate with a huge cross-section of society, 33 businesses in the Gallowgate. I had to be at business at 6.00am and that helped me establish a life-long habit of early rising for bible reading and prayer which I believe has sustained me spiritually all my life. I just keep reading the bible, even when I don’t understand it, even when it isn’t saying much to me, I keep reading it through, over and over.

**ANN: Your spiritual development has seemed to keep pace with career development. Were you never tempted away from Scotland?**

GEORGE: There was an occasion

when I was asked to join a major food importing company. I was appointed to their board at the age of 30 and they wanted me as International Director of their Meat Division, but to run it from London. We moved the family there for a trial period but decided instead that I would commute weekly from Glasgow and the firm accepted that. The pattern was set for some years like that and during that time I learned about international business. That has stood me in good stead in marketing “Scotland the Brand”.

**ANN: Operating on 5 hours sleep at night would be most people’s prescription for stress and breakdown, but you seem to thrive on it.**

GEORGE: Sleep isn’t the problem, stress is the factor. I have had a heart attack and 2 major bypass operations over the last 10 years. One bypass was bad enough. I got the message after that. I’m still not sure why the Lord had to have me go through it twice. I recognised the first time, just how tenuous our hold on life is and yielded to family pressure to choose an easier pace in life... though sometimes it feels as if that hasn’t worked out!

**ANN: You are one of a cluster of the most influential Christian business men in Scotland. What would you identify as the main pressure on Christians in business today?**

GEORGE: To maintain integrity. We have done a great deal of research into “essential Scottishness” for “Scotland the Brand”. Internationally Scots are identified as having 3 principle values, integrity, tenacity and spirit. Whatever else one might say of the late Donald Dewar, these qualities were certainly epitomised in him and perhaps that is why so many who never met him identified with him.

Scots are seen as people who can be trusted.

**ANN: So the main pressure in business would be to compromise your integrity?**

GEORGE: Undoubtedly. There is always the temptations to take shortcuts, to avoid the ethical route that may be economically costly, and the fear of losing position, money, popularity. That pressure never lifts and Christians need to be vigilant in every area. Your word needs to be your bond, the non Christian world expects that of you.

**ANN: If that is the main issue facing Christians in the business world, what do you see as the main issues facing Christians in the world today?**

GEORGE: I identify an absence of serious study of the bible as a very real threat and I long for men of stature to have access to the media to debate the crucial issues of the day. I'm sure the Lord has not removed the gift of evangelism from the church but where are the home grown evangelists to be heard gladly by the people as Jesus was? How do we develop them, give them a platform and support them? Where are today's Tom Allan and Stephen Anderson?

There is also a huge problem in this image conscious age about the image of the church and how we address that.

**ANN: You have been instrumental in organising many big evangelistic events in Scotland over the years. Do you think the day of "big events" is gone?**

GEORGE: I don't think there is a new Billy Graham who could fill football stadia with adults today but I do think young people will come to a "huge happening" if it is creative, attractive and speaks to their culture.

**ANN: Have you been surprised at the openings God has given you over the years. You organised Luis Palau's visits, you chair Mission Scotland. You chaired C.A.R.E. in its early days, overseeing its**

**premises near Westminster, you were organiser of the National Prayer Breakfast, and that's only to mention some of your involvement. Your finger has been on the pulse of so much in the spiritual life of the country. How do you reflect on that?**

GEORGE: I am so thankful that despite my lack of a university education the business world has been open to me at the highest level but I am even more thankful that the fire the Lord set alight in me is still burning today.

I am optimistic about the future. As far as I am concerned cynicism and depression are counted out of the Christian equation. To combat the negativity that today's church statistics produce we need to remind ourselves that we serve a victorious Jesus. That in the end Jesus is going to win.

**ANN: George Russell may not have a university degree, but he has the degrees that really matter. Wholehearted commitment to whatever the Lord calls him to do and the talent and wisdom to do it well. He is a man who has never lost sight of his roots or his Goal. Long may his brand of Scottish Christianity influence and permeate our society.**

## ***Book Reviews***

### **At the Cross — Meditations on People who were there.**

Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hunt  
IVP, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1999.  
128pp. \$9.99

ISBN 0 8308 2202 X

I didn't expect to be enthusiastic about a book of meditations. Usually such collections are too subjective. However, this slim volume is to be highly recommended. The illustrations (from woodcuts) by Helen Firth are quite evocative but I would have preferred the cover to have been in the same genre.

These meditations developed out of Good Friday services in 1996 and 7 in St Andrews Church, St Andrews. This makes them much more readable than a set of academic essays. The scholarship of Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hunt gives a biblical and theological bedrock which helps the imaginative element to be convincing. The chapters deal with eleven characters present at the Cross. The quality of the meditations do vary, the earlier chapters giving moving insights. The meditations are written mainly in the present tense to increase impact, but the use of present and past tense is not always consistent. I was surprised to find the study of Peter my favourite. Peter's betrayal has been the most overworked incident, yet there were new thoughts here.

What really sold this book to me were the many uses I could envisage for its contents. As an Easter Bible Study course for both private and group study it is enhanced by the Bible passage details at the start and a helpful reflection at the end of each chapter. The contents could stimulate ideas for Holy Week or Easter services. As a help to personal devotion this book must surely deepen our understanding of the Cross as we contemplate the lives of those who were there.

*Lorna Searle, Edinburgh*

## Book Reviews

### **On Giants' Shoulders — Studies in Christian Apologetics**

Edgar Powell

Day One, Epsom, 1999. 262pp. £8.99

ISBN 0902548 93X

*On Giants' Shoulders* is a manual of apologetics written from a creationist standpoint — that is, that all creation is derived from and directed by God. In expounding this at length and from many angles, the book provides an excellent introduction to a discipline which, if neglected, leaves the Christian deprived of a most important tool for effective witness.

Edgar Powell, a curriculum director in a college of further education, attacks the subject with crusading zeal. He carefully marshals his material into 12 chapters, two appendices and a glossary. Each chapter ends with a short section containing references to the books and authors referred to within, 'end notes' to shed further light on any point of special significance alluded to earlier, suggestions for further reading, key texts from the Bible, questions for further studies and quotations from eminent writers as food for thought.

Powell clearly demonstrates that he has read extensively, in Reformed and other evangelical theology and also in secular philosophy and the writings of leading scientific authorities, both modern and not so modern. Special tribute is paid (appendix 2) to C S Lewis, to whom he frequently refers.

In Chapter 1, Powell explains why Christians need to pursue apologetics, then for the next ten chapters, he addresses himself to the refutation of secularism and its fond hope that, as scientific knowledge increases, the concept of God will fade away. Powell restates the classic arguments for the existence of God, the cumulative effect of which, though not a proof, is persuasive. He then argues against the idea that man is merely the product of a certain ordering of bio-chemical reactions, presents the case for the Bible as

the authoritative revelation of God to man and for Jesus Christ as being the exclusive way to God. He considers the reality of Hell, the problem of suffering, the nature of miracles, fossils and the issue of evolution.

Throughout these chapters, what clearly emerges is not the issue of science undermining and disproving belief in God, as Powell's *bête-noir* Professor Richard Dawkins would have it, but rather the nature of the mind set of those who try to interpret science. With some, the mind set has been changed radically. Many, like Stephen Hawking and Fred Hoyle, who initially pursued a course of atheistic scientific secularism, have come to the opinion through their own scientific research that there must be an intelligence at work behind creation. For Powell, this 'intelligence' can only be the God of the Bible.

Thus the twelfth and final chapter, looking back with hindsight and 'seeing further by standing on giants' shoulders', to quote Sir Isaac Newton, crystallises the view that history is, on the one hand, strewn with the litter of outworn materialistic philosophies, while on the other (Powell in this respect refers to Martin Lloyd-Jones) there are 'the giant intellects of the centuries - Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal and others.' They are giants 'because they had the wisdom to see how far reason could take them and then to subject themselves to the revelation'. As for the Bible itself, Powell quotes Spurgeon, it 'widens and deepens over the years'.

Sir Fred Catherwood has written the foreword to the book, which Professor Derek Linkers, in his introduction, describes as 'an excellent read and valuable source book to challenge the sceptic and comfort the believer'.

*Peter Cook, Alston, Cumbria*

### **Twelve Vital Questions**

Leith Samuel

Bryntirion Press, Bridgend, 1998. 122pp £2.99

ISBN 1 85099 1429

Do you know what it is to pray in the

Spirit? Are you unsure about your next step in the Christian faith? These are two of the vital questions which this little book addresses.

This book would be ideal for anyone in the Church aged 15+ who really wants to be a strong Christian and to know, grow and sow in their Christian faith.

Throughout this book there are penetrating connections between the Old and New Testaments. Here Leith Samuel's earlier Jewish background stands him in good stead. The distinction between God as "utter worthiness" in Deuteronomy 32:4 and "His trustworthiness" as in Psalm 93:3 "light and truth of Scripture" is well made, to know that God's final authority comes home to us through the "Book of Truth". "What Scripture says God says" to help us know the certainty of the Word of Truth.

Helpful comments and advice for all Church situations are given, especially in reorganising and coping with the devil's strategies, eg "if we are gentle by nature, then the devil will encourage our non-judgemental characteristics and put it into our minds that 'love is everything' and truth divides" (Page 41). This book deals practically with "praying in the Spirit". This chapter should be read by all Christian leaders today and all Church prayer warriors and Fellowship Group leaders. Praying in the Spirit is always preceded with reading and studying the Word.

There is a clear warning about "a spirit of worldliness" in prayer today, ie those who like to hear the sound of their own voice, those who are articulate and feel it is their duty always to pray in public, and those who are told that they have great gifts of prayer and pride inflates their hearts. These warnings are very appropriate to Church prayer groups today. The author clearly declares that "praying in the Spirit" is not speaking in tongues.

The points on giving are well made as II Corinthians 8 & 9 is expounded, where the Christian is to be generous. "A farmer generous with his seed will reap a better harvest than one who isn't. A generous person will reap



## Book Reviews

bountifully in his spiritual life".

This book would be extremely appropriate to give to anyone as a follow-up to an Alpha Course or Christianity Explained.

*William Steele, Belfast Education  
and Library Board, Religious Education  
Adviser*

### The FACE that Demonstrates the Farce of Evolution

Hank Hanegraaff

Word Publishing, Nashville, 1998,

240 pp. \$16.99

ISBN 0-8499-1181-8

This rather slight book (only about 100 of the pages actually focus on the main topic, and many of these are used for photographs) aims to demolish the theory of evolution in order to open up the way for Christian faith. The "FACE" of the title is an acronym to enable memorisation of the four main subjects; "Fossil Follies" deals largely with "missing links"; "Ape-Men Fiction Fraud and Fantasy" covers the fossil record of human precursors; "Chance" addresses the question of whether random processes can be responsible for development of novelty and complexity; and "Empirical Science" claims that laws such as the conservation of energy and increase of entropy are inconsistent with evolution. A chapter on "Recapitulation" (the generally abandoned notion that the development of an embryo retraces the evolutionary track of successions of species) allows FACE to become FARCE. These follow an initial chapter ("Truth or Consequences") on the baneful consequences of the acceptance of Darwin's theory in wider areas of society.

One's opinions of this book will be coloured by one's judgment of the viability of the basic "Creationist" position; and that is best studied in the texts from which this book is clearly derived (nearly all the references are secondary rather than primary) by au-

thors such as Duane Gish and Henry Morris. Even within its own terms it is very unsatisfactory; there is no serious discussion of the fossil record as a whole, the age of the earth, or the significance of the flood; no notice is taken, for example, of the considerable number of humanoid fossils discovered in the last thirty years; the arguments presented to support evolution on the basis of comparing DNA sequences are not mentioned. This book would not help a student subscribing to the creationist view who was even moderately aware of the current situation in this area. I suspect that it would confirm the worst prejudices of an open-minded non-believer, and that the serious and positive points which the book does make would be lost.

It is disappointing to have to be so critical of a book whose aims, in terms of encouraging faith in the Biblical God as creator, redeemer and judge, are so positive; I would rather be attacking enemies than criticising friends!

*Paul Wraight, Aberdeen*

### The Psalms: Ancient Poetry of the Spirit

R S Thomas (Forward)

Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1997. 192pp.

£3.99

ISBN 0 7459 3805 1

*The Psalms: Ancient Poetry of the Spirit* is one of a series of volumes in a collection of books to be published by Lion Publishing and which is somewhat intriguingly entitled *The Lion Classic Bible Series*

In his Introduction, Lawrence Boadt briefly considers the familiar issues of the nature of the Book of Psalms, the variety and richness of the Psalms, the liturgical origin of the Psalms, personal piety and the Psalms, and sickness and tragedy in the Psalms. His comments are helpful, though not every reader of the Journal would necessarily share all of his assumptions or conclusions. F F Bruce's description of the distinctives of Hebrew poetry is characteristically informative and concise.

The chapter *The Psalms in Literature* consists of a series of brief dictionary style studies of the use of various images and quotations from the psalms in world literature.

The largest section of the book consists of the reproduction of one hundred psalms in a variety of English translations (from the majestic King James Version to the refreshing New Jerusalem Version) and are helpfully divided into ten major literary types, for example, Hymns of Praise, Zion Hymns, Royal Psalms of Yahweh, Royal Psalms of the King, Individual Laments and Wisdom Psalms. This division illustrates the rich diversity of the themes and emotions of the Psalms as honest and believing responses to God and his mighty works of redemption and judgement.

The Psalms will prove helpful as a popular introduction to the Book of Psalms. The grouping of familiar psalms according to literary type will prove especially helpful to pastoral visitors. The subtitle of the book, however, suggests that it will be of particular value in introducing this part of the word of God to any with an interest both in poetry in general and of spirituality in particular.

*Ian D Glover, Livingston*

### When Kumbaya is not Enough. A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry

Dean Borgman

Hendrickson, Massachusetts, 1997.

241 pp.

ISBN 1 56563 247 8

Just how do we engage young people as the Church? Get a youth worker is the cry! We can be all too overwhelmed by the complexity of needs in our communities. Dean Borgman recognises this and also that the danger is then to turn into protective isolationists and retreat into the ghetto of Christian subcultures. [p104].

If that is where you wish to remain, then DON'T READ THIS BOOK! The early chapters help you think theologically about your context for youth ministry. But don't miss the

Preface, it is a helpful overview, as he takes you step by step through what are foundations to understanding his use of the word Theology.

Although it did feel a little laboured at times in its use, don't let this deter you. The thread which effectively runs through from Chapter 3 onwards, is the dynamic of his threefold exegesis, i.e. interpretation and explanation of God's Word, culture and self. Borgman's intention is that ministry arising out of such a process and framework will be relevant and holistic in its approach to young people.

The various topics covered are: family and peers — strong influences, pop culture and its arts — compelling images, humour, music, sexuality. Each chapter concludes with Questions for Reflection and Discussion. In this way he helps you, the reader, interact with what has been written, but also helps you begin to challenge and effect your own ministry in your own cultural context with youth. Thankfully, this is not a purely theoretical book, but equally not a theologically empty one. It's well worth a reflective read for all in Christian ministry today.

*Fyfe Blair, Cove, Aberdeen*

### **Genesis: The Book of Beginnings**

Lion, Oxford, 1997. 188pp. £3.99  
ISBN 0 7324 1651 5

This is a curious and rather frustrating book. It forms part of the Lion Classic Bible Series. However the place of this book within the series is not made clear and this lack of purpose seems to pervade the whole enterprise. The book is divided into three rather disjointed sections, all reproduced from elsewhere, that sit uncomfortably with one another.

Part 1 consists of a brief introduction to the main themes of Genesis by Lawrence Boadt. In literary terms, he sees the creation stories as myths, but points out the need to distinguish between their literary structure and their theological content. He, quite rightly in my view, emphasises how the creation stories are polemical. They need

to be understood within their context as acting to refute and contradict pagan polytheistic beliefs of the Ancient Near East. Turning to chapters 12-50, he argues that for the Israelites the text 'represents Israel's attempt to show that Yahweh had guided their ancestors in a way of promise up to the events of the Exodus' (p.9). Whether Genesis contains an accurate picture of the one true God, or only reflects an image of Yahweh as a tribal deity of Israel's own creation, is left unanswered.

The focus then jumps abruptly to Part 2, 'Genesis in Literature', which forms the major section of the book. It consists of twenty-eight previously published dictionary articles on themes, images and characters within Genesis. Each article examines how a particular element of Genesis has been used within great works of English literature over the centuries.

Part 3 moves to the text itself, reproducing Genesis in a highly readable form, without verses, based on an abridged version of the Revised English Bible. While commendable, a good translation of the Bible would do the job just as well.

Overall, I am unsure who would buy this book. Good commentaries exist for those looking for a detailed discussion of the text. Better books exist on the historical significance of Genesis. Numerous Bible translations have made Genesis easily accessible for the modern reader. For those interested in any of these three areas, I would have to say, 'I wouldn't start from here if I were you'.

*Patrick Mitchel, Irish Bible School*

### **Mark — The People's Bible Commentary**

Dick France,  
Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford, 1996. 227 pp, £7.99  
ISBN 1 84101 046 4

This book is intended to help people who want to study the Scriptures in a way that will warm the heart as well as instructing the mind. Technical issues are kept brief, and scholarly insights are translated into ordinary language and

## **Book Reviews**

used for devotional purposes. Three kinds of readers are envisaged, those who have never really studied the Bible before, people engaged in teaching in a church setting, and ministers burned out on the Bible needing to recover the wonder of Scripture.

Does it work? On the basis of this one volume, I would give a qualified yes.

Mark is divided into 107 sections, varying from two to ten verses in length, and Dick France writes a page and a half of comments on each. Helpful background is combined with contemporary application. I decided to use it as a devotional book, reading a couple of sections each day. As I did, my appreciation of the comments grew. Dick France has lived inside this gospel and is full of insight. I would say that I know Mark fairly well, but most days there was a new perspective or a telling phrase which stopped me in my tracks.

The length of each section together with the style makes it very accessible, but for one thing. Many of the sentences are too long.

With this one qualification, I found it an excellent book. It certainly has both warmed my heart and instructed my mind. And it has not required hard work on my part to make it happen!

*Neil Dougall, Edinburgh*

### **Making Sense of Living as a Christian**

Bob Horn  
IVP, Leicester, 1998. 208pp. £5.99  
ISBN 0 85111 248 X

*Making Sense of Living as a Christian* boils down to a lot of basic Christian common sense. In fairly short compass it deals with a great many of the problems Christians face and which can cause feelings of uncertainty and confusion, especially in younger Christian lives. 'How should we react when trouble comes into our lives? — Why is it so easy to be a Christian on a Sunday, but so difficult on a Monday? —

## Book Reviews

Can we really believe the Bible? — What is the point of praying? — How can I know what God really wants from my life? etc.' are some of the questions discussed. The language used is relevant and modern and I constantly found myself saying to myself 'Yes, I've thought like that — yes, I've had that problem.' So it is certainly a book which scratches where it itches. All the advice given is down to earth, practical and good common but Biblical sense!

Occasionally when Biblical explanations are given, I found that the author resorted just to quoting verse upon verse of the Bible — it would have been great if these passages had been transformed into the same relevant language that makes up the rest of the book, with perhaps the verses quoted in footnotes — although perhaps readers not so familiar with the Bible would find these parts helpful.

The basic thesis of the book is that often when we fail to make sense of the Christian life it is because we do not have a balanced view of the nature of God and the gospel. He refuses to allow us to accept the easy answers.

For a fresh practical look at many of the problems which affect the lives of God's people, it is a helpful book and as a preacher, it made me stop and think of the relevancy of the language I use and also made me examine myself to see whether or not my preaching maintains the kind of balance which this book does.

*W B Black. Stornoway*

### **The Bumps are What You Climb On: Encouragement for Difficult Days**

Warren W Wiersbe  
Crossway Books, Leicester, 1998.  
135pp. £4.99  
ISBN 1-85684-176-6

The book consists of thirty short chapters, of 3-4 pages each. The loose theme holding the chapters together is encouragement for Christians facing difficult times.

The author describes the book's content as 'meditations'. His intention is that these brief meditations will strengthen hearts, build faith, increase love and cause the hope of Christ's return to burn brighter.

Far from fostering encouragement, however, this is a disappointing and dated book. The thirty meditations are transcriptions of messages given by Mr Wiersbe over *Songs in the Night*, the worldwide radio ministry of the Moody Church in Chicago more than twenty years ago. The fact that these messages were broadcast in the late 1970's and first published in 1980 makes me wonder why they have been republished now without revision. Regular quotations from the Authorised Version of the Bible reinforce the dated feel.

With each 'meditation' being a self-contained broadcast talk, the book lacks structure and development. There is no sense of continuity and much repetition.

*Andrew Downie. Kilmarnock*

### **Christmas Sermons**

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones  
Brynterion Press, Bridgend, 1998. 90pp.  
£3.30  
ISBN 1 85049 151 8

For the Parish Minister it's as well that Christmas comes but once a year, for each year it gets harder to produce fresh sermons for the occasion. How refreshing, then, to pick up a slim book of "Christmas Sermons" by that master preacher, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for they have a timeless freshness, even though they were first preached over forty years ago. 'The four sermons which comprise the series are an exposition of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). They are just what you would expect from "the Doctor" — exquisitely crafted, unerringly focused, tellingly targeted.

As such they are inspirational for both preachers and their people. Indeed, Lloyd-Jones himself says in opening, "There is perhaps no better way of approaching the season of Christmas. ... Indeed, I think we can

say that there is no better test of our understanding the meaning of the Incarnation, everything we think of and celebrate during these days, than our reaction to this song of Mary; because ... here, in this short compass, in a very extraordinary manner she brings us face to face with some of the many central matters in connection with our salvation."

Lloyd-Jones explores in typically penetrating style this great salvation in terms of "the movement of God" and Mary's archetypal response, which is to magnify the Lord. Then Lloyd-Jones explores the real meaning of Christmas as a demonstration of God's wisdom in dealing with the power of evil and sin in the world and in our lives. In the third sermon Lloyd-Jones earths this wisdom in God's patient, faithful outworking of His promises in His Word. All through these sermons Lloyd-Jones is in turn cogently persuasive and passionately pleading with an intense urgency, especially in the final sermon which is a re-application of them all.

In this final sermon Lloyd-Jones succinctly explains what it is to be a Christian and how necessary it is to become a Christian — to be born again — as he explores Mary's response of praise to the message of the angel.

These sermons are vintage Lloyd-Jones — the old physician of souls dealing with the reality of fallen humanity. That is what celebrating Christmas is ultimately about — demonstrating how God in Christ has dealt with the awful reality of our fallen humanity. This is a gem of a book.

Brynterion Press are to be commended for making these jewels of Lloyd-Jones' "Christmas Sermons" available to us.

*Alan Macgregor. Banff*